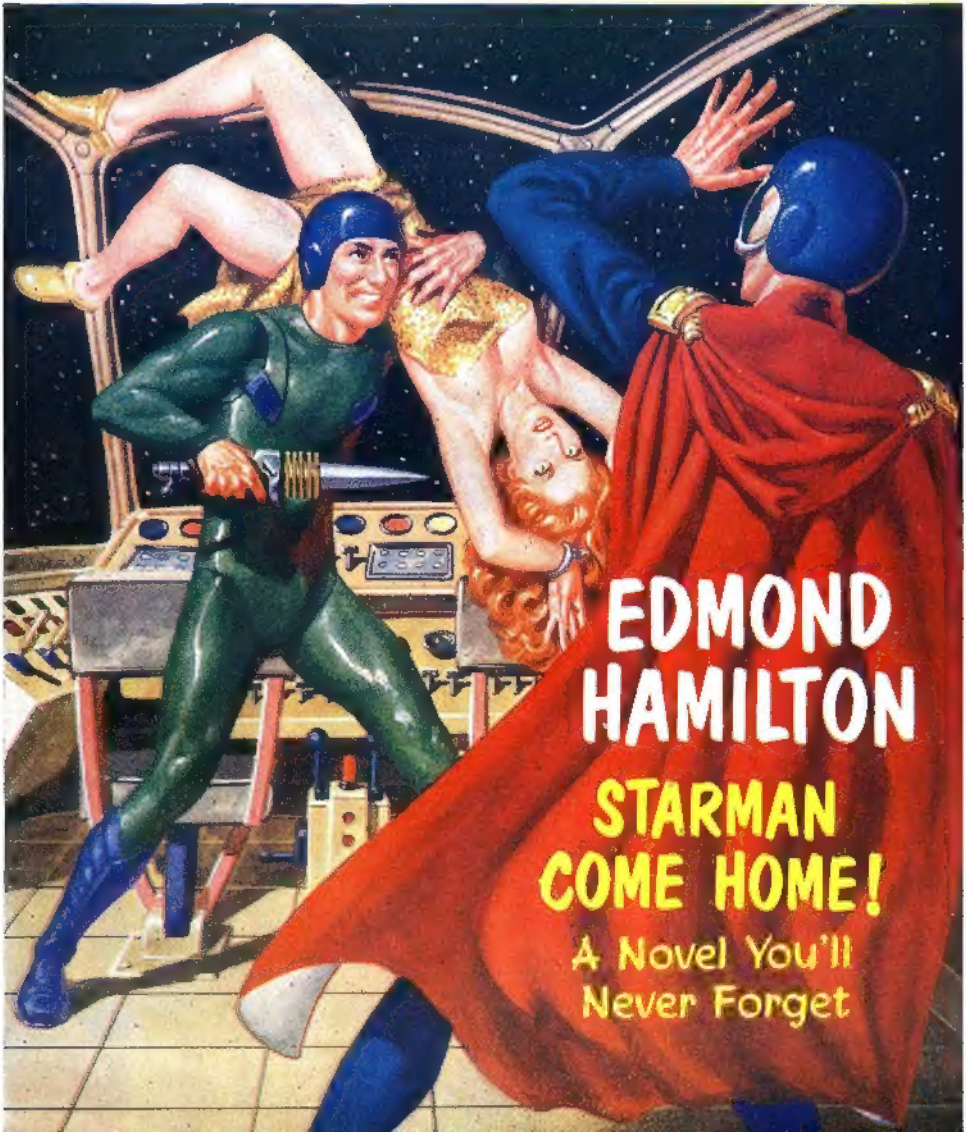
September 1954 35¢

Universe

SCIENCE FICTION



Editorial

The last couple of months (April and May) brought quite a few changes to UNIVERSE. As we told you in the editorial last issue, the editorial offices are now just that—separate offices. One is firmly entrenched at Amherst, with a good share of manuscripts, page proofs, galleys and office records. The other editor is beginning to get settled in Cincinnati with the balance of the manuscripts, page proofs, galleys and office records. This has resulted, understandably, in some confusion, several telephone calls between the two cities, and quite a bit of mail shuttling back and forth.

But order is finally emerging out of chaos, and here is *Universe No. 7*, and the long-promised Edmond Hamilton story, *Starman Come Home!* There's a nice line-up of shorter stories backing it, and the revived features you've been asking for—Personals, Letters and The Club House.

And this is what we've been leading up to. You readers may have been missing these features, but believe me, we've been missing them too! There *was* an atmosphere of friendliness about *Other Worlds* that has been missing from *Science Stories* and *Universe*. When the first batch of letters congratulating us on the "new" *Universe* reached us, we started searching through them looking for familiar names. They were there, old friends and new. We've printed some of them in this issue's Letters column, but there's one we'd like to include right here.

Dear Bea,

The July USF was the first really bright sign in the stfield so far this year. Mags have been dropping by the wayside, others have cut pagage, etc. The field expanded too far too fast. The bubble had to burst—and it did. But the period of deflation is a long one . . . each mag is holding on hard, waiting for the *other ones* to fold first and leave a market behind them. We'll just have to wait it out, too.

Now that Rog is back in business with "The Club House," he might do a review of *Vamp* (nee *SF*). In the first issue I had an article about OW's folding. I said some pretty strong things — and meant 'em! I still do. But John Magnus, who edits and publishes *Vamp*, had a bit of a note at the end of the article, in which he said that OW was a happy mag . . . and that USF and the now-defunct SCIENCE STORIES were not.

Why was OW a happy mag? For a number of reasons: Rap's attitude was To Hell With The Stuffed Shirts, there was a letter column, there was a Personals, and there was the type of editorial that had become Rap's trademark. I don't know if Rap's attitude made $$$ or not, but when he dropped those other three items he was

(*Concluded on Page* 120)

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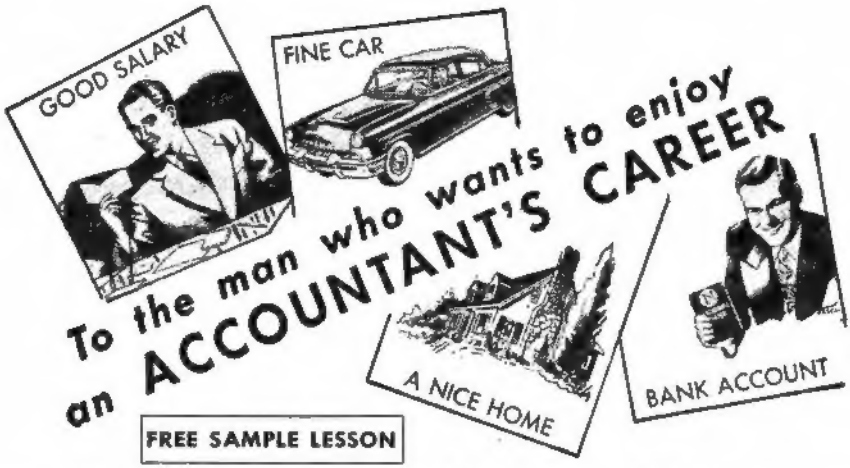

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STARMAN COME HOME

Was he Neil Banning, salesman for a New York publisher, or Kyle Valkar, hereditary ruler of the Old Empire? Rolf declared him The Valkar, and offered to prove his claim. There was only one drawback — if Rolf was wrong, the test meant death for Banning.

YOU were a real person, a normal individual. You lived a real life, in a real world. And then in one day, in a few hours of one day, it all fell away around you like a structure of thin paper crumbling in the rain, and you found that you had stepped right out of it into an abyss as wide and dark as the cosmos, without beginning, without end, without one solid truth to cling to.

That was the way it seemed to Neil Banning. He was thirty-one years old, he was a New York publisher's salesman, he was healthy, well-adjusted, and he liked his job. He ate three meals a day, worried about his income tax, and thought occasionally about getting married. He had a past, and a future. But that was before he went to Greenville.

It was pure chance. A sales trip to the West Coast, the realization on the train that he was only a hundred miles from his boyhood home, and a sudden sentimental decision. Three hours later, in bright spring sunshine, he debarked in the little Nebraska town.

He looked up at the blue prairie sky with the cloud-flecks in it, and he looked along the wide, unbusy main street. He smiled. It hadn't changed too much. Towns like Greenville are timeless.

There was one taxi-cab at the station. The driver, a long-jawed young man with a nondescript cap on the back of his head, put Banning's bags in the cab and said, "Excelsior Hotel, mister? It's the best one."

Banning said, "Just take the bags there. I'll walk."

The young man looked at him. "Cost you fifty cents anyway.

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Complete Novel By Edmond Hamilton

Illustrated by H. W. McCauley

Might as well ride."

Banning paid him. "I'll still walk"

"It's your money, mister," said the young man. He drove off, and Banning started along the street with the fresh prairie wind whipping his topcoat around his legs.

The feed store, the lumber company, the old Horton hardware, Del Parker's barber shop. The Court House, set squat and dumpy in its square. The Dairy Lunch had a new sign featuring a colossal triple-deck ice-cream cone, and the Hiway Garage was bigger now, with a side lot full of farm implements.

He walked slowly, taking his time. The people he passed looked at him with the open, friendly curiosity of the Middle West, and he looked at them, but he didn't know any of them. After all, ten years was a long time to be away. Still, there ought to be at least one familiar face to welcome him home. Ten years wasn't *that* long.

He turned right at the old bank building and went down Hollins Street. Two long straggling blocks. The house, anyway, should still be standing.

It wasn't.

Banning stopped. He looked up and down the street. No mistake. This was the place, and the houses on either side were exactly as he remembered them, but where his uncle's house had stood was nothing now but weeds.

"Burned down," he thought. "Or been moved to another lot, maybe."

But he felt uneasily that there was something wrong about it. A house isn't easily erased from the surface of the earth. There's always something — a rubble-heap where the cellar was filled in, the outline of the foundation, a trace of the old walks, the trees and garden beds.

There was nothing here, nothing but a weedy vacant lot. That didn't seem right at all. He felt disappointed—the house you had grown up in was like a part of you, the focal point of your whole childhood, too full of memories to be easily lost. But he was puzzled, too, and oddly worried.

"The Greggs would know," he thought, and went on to the next house and up onto its porch. "If they still live here."

His knock was answered by an old man he didn't know, a pink-faced cheery little gnome who came around from the back yard with a garden hoe in his hands. He didn't mind talking. But he couldn't seem to understand Banning's questions at all. He kept shaking his head, and finally he said, "You've got the wrong street,

young fellow. Never was any Jesse Banning lived around here."

"It was ten years ago," Banning explained. "Maybe before you came here—"

The old man stopped smiling. "Listen, I'm Martin Wallace. I've lived in this house forty-two years. You ask anybody. And I never heard of any Bannings. Furthermore, there's never *been* any house on that vacant lot. I know. I own it."

The first touch of real fright slid over Banning. "But I lived in a house on that lot! I lived in it for years when I was a boy. It belonged to my uncle. You weren't here then, the Greggs lived here, they had a daughter with two yellow pigtails, and a boy named Sam. I used to play—"

"See here," said the old man. All his friendliness was gone, he looked a little angry and a little alarmed. "If this is a joke, it ain't funny. If it ain't a joke, you're drunk or crazy. You get out of here!"

Banning stared at him. He didn't move. "Please," he said. "That apple-tree, at the foot of your lot—I fell out of it when I was eight years old and broke my wrist. You don't forget things like that."

The old man dropped his hoe, and backed into his house. "If you ain't off my place in two seconds," he said, "I'm going to call the police." He slammed the door, and bolted it.

Banning glared at the door, furious himself now because that faint edge of fear had sharpened and was beginning to cut into him. Deep.

"Crazy," he muttered. "Must be senile." He looked again at the vacant lot, then at the big brick house across the street. He started toward it. He remembered that house very well, and the people who had lived in it. Their name was Lewis, and they had had a daughter too, and he had taken her to dances, and picnics, and on hayrides. If they still lived here they would know what had happened.

"Lewises?" said the large, red-faced woman who answered his ring. "No, no Lewises here."

"Ten years ago," he said desperately. "They were here then, and the Bannings lived where that vacant lot is."

She stared. "I've lived here sixteen years myself, and before that I lived in that grey house three doors down. I was born there. There were never any Lewises here, or any Bannings either. And there wasn't *ever* any house on that vacant lot."

She didn't say any more. Neither did Banning. He watched the

door close. He lifted his hand to pound on it, to break it down and get hold of the red-faced woman and make her explain who was crazy, or lying, or what. Then he thought, this is ridiculous, letting them get me upset. There must be an explanation, some reason for it. Maybe a property deal, maybe they're afraid I have some claim on my uncle's old place. Maybe that's why they're lying to me, trying to make me believe I'm mistaken.

There was one place to find out for sure. One place where there was no chance of anybody lying. He walked back, fast, to the main street, and up to the Court House.

He told the girl clerk what he wanted, and waited while she checked the records. She was not in any hurry about it. Banning smoked nervously. He was sweating, and his hands shook a little.

The girl came back with a slip of paper. She seemed rather annoyed with him. "There's never been any house at 344 Hollins," she said. "Here's the record. The property—"

Banning grabbed the paper out of her hands. It said that Martin W. Wallace had purchased a house and lot at 346 Hollin, together with the unimproved lot adjoining it, legal description as follows, from a Walter Bergstrander in 1912. The lot was still unimproved.

Banning stopped sweating. He got cold. "Listen," he said to the girl. "Look up these names in Vital Statistics." He scribbled them down for her. "In the death records, Jesse Banning and Ila Roberts Banning." He scribbled dates beside each one.

The girl took the list and flounced away with it. She was gone a long time. When she came back, she was no longer annoyed. She was angry.

"Are you trying to be funny or something?" she demanded. "Wasting a person's time like this! There's no record of any of those people." She slammed the list down in front of Banning and turned away.

The wicket gate was just beside him. He pushed it open and went in. "Look again," he said. "Please. They're there. They have to be there."

"You're not allowed in here," she told him, edging away. "What's the matter with you? I told you they're not—"

He caught her arm. "Show me the books then. I'll look for myself."

She yelled and pulled away. He let her go, and she ran out of the office and down the hall, calling, "Mr. Harkness! Mr. Harkness!"

Banning, in the record room, looked helplessly at the tall shelves of heavy ledgers. He didn't understand the markings on them, he wanted to tear them all down and search them till he found the proofs that must be there, the proofs that he wasn't crazy or lying. But where to start?

He didn't start. There was a heavy footstep, and a hand on his shoulder. It was a beefy, unperturbed man with a cigar in his mouth. He took the cigar out and said, "Now young fellow, what are you creating a disturbance about?"

Banning began angrily, "Listen, whoever you are—"

"Harkness," said the beefy man. "I'm Roy Harkness, and I'm Sheriff of this county. You'd better come along to my office."

Hours later, Banning sat in the Sheriff's office and finished telling his story for the third time.

"It's a conspiracy," he said wearily. "I don't know what it's all about, but you're all in on it."

Neither the Sheriff, nor his deputy, nor the reporter and photographer from the Greenville newspaper, laughed outright. But he could see the grins they didn't quite suppress.

"You're charging," said the Sheriff, "that the whole city of Greenville has got together and deliberately falsified the records. That's a serious charge. And what reason would we have?"

Banning felt sick. He knew he was sane, and yet the world had suddenly ceased to make sense. "That's what I can't figure out. Why? Why would you people want to take my past away?" He shook his head. "I don't know. But I know that that old Mr. Wallace was lying. Maybe he's behind this."

"Only trouble is," said the sheriff, "that I've known the old man all my life. I can tell you for certain that he's owned that lot for forty-two years and there's never been so much as a hencoop on it."

Banning said, "Then I'm lying about this? But why would I?"

The Sheriff shrugged. "Could be build-up for some kind of extortion scheme. Could be a cute gag because you want publicity for some reason. And could be, you're nuts."

Banning got up, rage flaring in him. "So that's it—frame this up and then tell me I'm crazy. Well. we'll see."

He started toward the door. The Sheriff made a gesture. The photographer got a fine action shot as the deputy grabbed Banning and hustled him expertly into the jail-wing beyond the office, and into a

cell.

"Psycho," said the reporter, staring at Banning through the bars. You can't tell by looking at them, can you?"

Banning looked stupidly back through the bars at them, unable to believe that this was happening. "A frame-up—," he said thickly.

"No frame-up at all, son," the Sheriff said. "You come in and make a disturbance, you charge a lot of people with conspiracy—well, you got to stay here till we check up on you." He turned to his deputy. "Better wire to that New York publisher he says he works for. Give them a general description—six feet tall, black hair, black eyes, and so on, just in case."

He went away, and so did the deputy and the reporter and photographer. Banning was alone in the cell-wing.

He sat down and put his head between his hands. Bright sunlight poured through the high barred window, but as far as Banning was concerned it was midnight, and the darkest he had ever known.

If only he had not decided to visit the old home town—

But he had. And now he was faced with questions. Who was lying, who was crazy? He could not find any answers.

Evening came. They brought him food, and he asked about arranging bail, but he could get no definite answer. The Sheriff was out. He demanded a lawyer, and was told not to worry. He sat down again, and waited. And worried.

For lack of anything else to do, he went over the years of his life, starting from the first thing he could remember. They were all there. There were gaps and vague spots, of course, but everybody had those — the countless days in a lifetime when nothing much happened. But the main facts remained. He was Neil Banning, and he had spent a lot of his life in Greenville, in a house that everyone said had never existed.

In the morning Harkness came in and spoke to him. "I heard from New York," he said. "You're all clear on that angle."

He studied Banning through the bars. "Look, you seem a decent enough young fellow. Why don't you tell me what this is all about?"

"I wish I could," said Banning grimly.

Harkness sighed. "Pete's right, you can't tell by looking at them. I'm afraid we have to hold you for a psychiatric."

"A *what?*"

"Listen, I've combed this town and its records. There just never were any Bannings here. There

weren't even any Greggs. And the only Lewises I could find live on a farm twenty miles from here and they never heard of you." He spread his hands. "What am I supposed to think?"

Banning turned his back. "You're lying," he said. "Get out."

"Okay." Harkness tossed something through the bars. "This might interest you, anyway." He went off down the corridor. After a while Banning picked the thing up. It was the local newspaper of the previous evening. It had a picture of him on the front page, and an article. It was a good story, the nut from New York accusing a little Nebraska town of stealing away his past. It was a story so droll that Banning knew it would surely be on all the wire services.

Banning read it three times. He began to think that soon he really would need a psychiatrist, and probably a straitjacket, too.

Just before sundown the deputy came in and said, "You've got a visitor."

Banning sprang up. Someone must have remembered him, someone who would prove that he was telling the truth.

But the man who came down the corridor was a stranger, a dark, hard, massive man of middle years, who wore his clothes with a curious awkwardness. He strode up to the cell door, walking lightly for all his bulk. He looked at Banning, and his eyes were very dark, very intense.

His bleak, square face did not change expression. Yet a subtle change did come over this massive man as he stared. He had the look of a man who has waited and endured for ages, a grim and somber man of stone who at last sees that for which he waited.

"The Valkar," he said softly, not to Banning only, but to himself, his voice leaping with a harsh throb. "Kyle Valkar. It's been a long time, but I've found you."

Banning stared. "What did you call me? And who are you? *I* never saw *you* before."

"Didn't you?" said the stranger. "But you did. I'm Rolf. And you're the Valkar. And the bitter years are over."

Quite unexpectedly, he reached through the bars and took Banning's right hand, and set it against his own bowed forehead, in a gesture of obeisance.

II

For a moment, too shocked even to move, Banning stared at the stranger. Then he caught his hand away.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, drawing back. "What is

this? I don't know you. And I'm not—whatever name you called me. I'm Neil Banning."

The stranger smiled. In his dark, ruthless face there was something that frightened Banning more than open enmity would have done. It was affection, such as a man might have for a son. or younger brother. Deep affection, mingled oddly with respect.

"Neil Banning," said the man who called himself Rolf. "Yes. It was the story of Neil Banning in the newspapers that led me here. You are a small sensation now, the man who was robbed of his past." He laughed softly. "It's a pity they can't know the truth."

A wild surge of hope went through Banning. "Then you do know it? You can tell me—you can tell *them* why this has been done?"

"I can tell *you*," said Rolf, emphasizing the pronoun. "But not here, not now. Be patient a few more hours. I'll get you out of here tonight."

"If you can arrange bail for me, I'll be grateful," Banning said. "But I don't understand why you're doing this." He looked searchingly at Rolf. "Perhaps I should remember you. Did you know me as a child—?"

"Yes," said Rolf. "I knew you as a child—and as a man. But you could not remember me." A black look of anger crossed his face, and he said savagely, "The swine. Of all the evils they could have done you, this exile from the mind is—" He caught himself. "No. They might have done worse. They might have killed you."

Banning gaped. People whirled through his mind, old Wallace, Harkness, the red-faced woman. "*Who* might have killed me?"

Rolf said two names, very softly. They were strange names. "Tharanya." And another. "Jommor."

He watched Banning closely.

Suddenly Banning understood. He backed well away from the door. "You," he said, "are crazy as a hatter." He was glad there were bars between them.

Rolf grinned. "It's natural you should think so—just as the good Sheriff thinks it of you. Don't be too hard on him, Kyle, it isn't his fault. He's quite right, you see. Neil Banning never existed."

He bent his head in a curiously proud little bow, and turned away. "You will be free tonight. Trust me, even if you do not understand."

He was gone before Banning could think to yell for the deputy. Banning sat down on the bunk, utterly dejected. For a moment he had hoped, for a moment he had been sure that the big dark man

knew the truth and could help him. It was that much harder to realize his mistake.

"I suppose," he thought bitterly, "that every lunatic in the country will start calling me brother."

He didn't hear anything that evening about bail being arranged for him. He had not expected to.

Banning picked at the dinner they brought him. He was tired, in a sullen, ugly mood. He stretched out on the bunk, thinking the hell with them, thinking of the pleasure he would have in suing them all for false arrest. After a while he fell into an uneasy sleep.

The cold-iron sound of his cell door opening brought him up, wide awake. It was night now, and only the corridor lights were on. The big dark man stood in the open door, smiling.

"Come," he said. "The way is clear."

Banning said, "How did you get in here? How did you get those keys?"

He looked past the dark man, to the end of the corridor. The deputy was leaning forward across his desk, with his head on the blotter. One arm hung down, relaxed and boneless.

Banning cried out with sudden horror, "My God, what have you done, what have you got me into?" He flung himself on the cell door, trying to shut it again, to force the stranger out. "Get out, I won't have anything to do with it." He began to yell.

With an expression of regret, Rolf opened his left hand to reveal a small egg-shaped thing of metal, with a lens in one end. He said, "Forgive me, Kyle. There's no time now to explain."

A brief pale flicker came out of the lens. Banning felt no pain, only a mild shock and then a dissolution as black and still as death. He did not even feel Rolf's arms catch him as he fell.

When he woke again he was in a car. He was in the back seat, and Rolf was beside him, sitting so that he could watch him. The car was going very fast along a prairie road, and it was still night. The driver was no more than a shadow against the dim glow of the dashboard lights, and outside there was only a vast darkness caught under a bowl of stars.

It was dark in the back seat, and Banning had not moved very much, nor spoken. He thought perhaps Rolf had not seen that he was conscious again. He thought that if he threw himself forward suddenly, he might catch the big dark man off guard.

He gathered himself, trying not to change even the rhythm of his breathing.

Rolf said, "I don't want to put you out again, Kyle. Don't make me."

Banning hesitated. He could see from the way Rolf was sitting that he was holding something in his hand. He remembered the metal egg, and decided that he would have to wait for a better chance. He was sorry. He would have liked to get his hands on Rolf.

"You killed that deputy," he said. "Probably others, too. You're not only crazy, you're a killer."

With irritating patience, Rolf said, "You're not dead, are you?"

"No, but—"

"Neither is the deputy, nor anyone else. These people have no part in our affairs. It would be shameful to kill them." He chuckled. "Tharanya would be surprised to hear me say that. She thinks of me as a man without a soul."

Banning sat up straight. "Who is Tharanya? What's that thing you knocked me out with? Where are you taking me — and what the hell is this all about?" His voice rose to a high pitch of fright and fury. He was no more than normally afraid of physical injury and death, but he had had a nerve-racking couple of days and he was not at his best. It seemed too much to ask for him to remain calm while being pushed over the nighted prairie at breakneck speed by a lunatic kidnapper and his accomplice.

"I suppose," Rolf said, "it wouldn't do any good if I told you I'm your friend, your best and oldest friend, and that you have nothing to fear."

"No. It wouldn't."

"I didn't think so." Rolf sighed. "And I'm afraid the answers to your questions won't help either. Jommor did a damn good job on you—better than I'd have believed possible."

Banning took hold of the edge of the seat, trying to control himself. "And who is Jommor?"

"Tharanya's right-hand man. And Tharanya is sole and sovereign ruler of the New Empire . . . And you're Kyle Valkar, and I'm Rolf, who wiped your nose for you when you were—" He broke off, swearing in a language Banning did not understand. "What's the use?"

"New Empire," said Banning. "Delusions of grandeur. You still haven't told me what that gadget is."

"Cerebro-shocker," said Rolf, as one says "rattle" to a baby. He began to talk to the driver in that foreign and incomprehensible tongue, not taking his eyes off Banning. Presently there was silence again.

The road got worse. The car slowed down some, but not enough to suit Banning. After a while he realized that there wasn't any road at all. Banning began again to measure the distance between himself and Rolf. He also began to doubt the power of the metal egg. Cerebro-shocker, indeed. Something else must have hit him back there in the cell, something he hadn't seen, a believable thing like a gun-barrel of brass knuckles. It was dark in there and the door had been open. The accomplice, the driver, could easily have got in, could have been standing behind him, ready to lower the boom when Rolf signalled him.

Ahead of them, a mile or so away across the flat prairie, there was a curious flare of light, and a great wind struck them, and was gone.

The driver spoke, and Rolf answered, with a note of relief.

Banning let himself roll with the motion of the car. He waited till it pitched in the right direction, and then he threw himself, fast and hard, at the big dark man.

He was wrong about the metal egg. It worked.

This time he did not go clear out. Apparently the degrees of shock could be controlled, and Rolf did not want him unconscious—only partly so. He could still see and hear and move, though not normally, and what he saw and heard were like the impersonal shadow-shapes and unreal voices of a film, having no connection with himself.

He saw the prairie roll on past the car, black and empty under the stars. Then he felt the car go slower and slower until it stopped, and he heard Rolf's voice telling him gently to get out. He took Rolf's hand, as though he were a child and Rolf his father, and let himself be helped. His body moved, but it had ceased to be his own.

Outside there was a cold wind sweeping, and a sudden light that blotted out the stars. The light showed the car and the prairie grass. It showed the driver, and Rolf, and himself, laying their shadows long and black behind them. It showed a wall of metal, bright as a new mirror and straight for a hundred feet or so horizontally, but rising vertically in a convex curve.

There were openings in the wall. Windows, ports, a door, a hatchway, who knew the right words? It was not a wall. It was the side and flank of a ship.

Men came out of it. They wore strange clothing, and they spoke a strange tongue. They moved forward, and Rolf and the driver and Neil Banning walked to meet them.

Presently they stopped in the full glare of the light. The strange men spoke to Rolf, and he answered them, and then Banning realized in a dim and distant way that the men were all looking at him and that in their faces was a reverence almost approaching superstition.

He heard them say, "The Valkar!" And as far off as he was, he felt a small, faint shiver touch him at the fierce and hopeful and wild and half-despairing tone in which they said it.

Rolf led him toward the open hatchway of the ship. He said quietly, "You asked me where I was taking you. Come aboard, Kyle—I'm taking you home."

The room in which Neil Banning found himself was larger and more sumptuous than the jail cell, but it was none the less a prison. He found that out as soon as full consciousness returned to him—he had a feeling he had passed out again, and for quite some time, but he could not be sure about this. Anyway, he had got up and tried the doors. One led into an adjoining bath, rather oddly appointed. The other was locked. Tight. There were no windows. The metal wall was smooth and unbroken. Light in the room came from some overhead source he could not see.

For a few minutes he prowled uneasily, looking at things, trying to think. He remembered the weird nightmarish dream he had had about the light on the prairie and the great silver ship. Nightmare, of course. Some hypnotic vision induced by the dark man who called himself Rolf. Who in the devil's name *was* Rolf, and why had the man picked him as the victim of his insane behavior?

A ship, in the middle of the prairie. The men in the strange clothes, who had hailed him as—what was the name again? Valkar. A dream, of course. Vivid, but only a dream—

Or was it?

No windows. No sense of motion. No sound—yes, there was a sound, or almost one, if you let your whole body listen for it. A deep throbbing, like the beating of a giant's heart. The air had an unfamiliar smell.

With senses suddenly sharpened to an abnormal acuteness, Banning realized that everything in the room was unfamiliar. The colors, the textures, the shapes, everything from the plumbing fixtures to the furnishings of the bunkbed he had just left.

Even his own body felt unfamiliar. The weight of it had changed.

He began to pound on the door

and yell.

Rolf came almost at once. The man who had driven the car was with him, and now they both carried the egg-shaped metal things. The ex-driver bowed to Banning, but he stayed several paces behind Rolf, so that Banning could not possibly attack or evade both of them at once. They now wore clothing such as the men had worn in Banning's dream, a sort of tunic and close-fitting leggings that looked comfortable and functional and quite unreal.

Rolf entered the room, leaving the other man outside. Banning caught a glimpse of a narrow corridor walled in metal like the room, and then Rolf shut the door again. Banning heard it lock.

"Where are we?" he demanded.

"At the moment," said Rolf, "we're well out from Sol on our way to Antares. I don't think the exact readings would mean much to you."

Banning said, "I don't believe you." He didn't. And yet, at the same time he knew, somehow, that it was true. The knowledge was horrible, and his brain twisted and turned like a hunted rabbit to get away from it.

Rolf walked over to the outer wall. "Kyle," he said, "you must start to believe me. Both our lives depend on it."

He pressed a stud somewhere in the wall, and a section of the metal slid back, revealing a port.

"This isn't really a window," Rolf said. "It's a view-plate, a very complex and clever electronic set-up that reproduces a true picture of what ordinary sight couldn't see."

Banning looked. Beyond the port was stunning darkness and light. The darkness was a depthless void into which his mind seemed falling, tumbling and screaming through drear infinities, disoriented, lost. But the light—

He looked upon a million million suns. The familiar constellations were lost, their outlines drowned in the glittering ocean of stars. They crashed in upon him like thunder, he fell and fell in an abyss of ray and darkness, he—

Banning put his hands over his eyes and turned away. He fell down on the bunk and lay there shuddering. Rolf closed the port.

"You believe me now?"

Banning groaned.

"Good," said Rolf. "You believe in a star-ship. Then you have logically to believe in a civilization capable of producing a star-ship, and a type of culture in which a star-ship is both useful and necessary."

Banning sat up in the bunk, still sick and shaky and clinging to its comforting solidity. He

knew it was hopeless, but he advanced his final negative argument.

"We're not moving. If we're going faster than light — and that's impossible in itself, according to what little science I know—there ought to be some feeling of acceleration."

"The drive is not mechanical," Rolf said, standing where he could watch Banning's face. "Its a field-type force, and since we're part of the field we are, in effect, at rest. So there's no sense of motion. As to possibility—" He grinned. "While I was on Earth, searching for you, I was amused to note the first crack in that limiting-speed theory. A research physicist clocked some particles moving faster than light, and the apologetic explanations that they were only photons and had no mass is merely evading the question."

Banning cried incredulously, "But a civilization of star ships, whose people come and go to Earth—and yet nobody on Earth knows about it—it's impossible!"

"That," said Rolf dryly, "is Earth egotism talking. Earth is a fringe world, and in some ways a damn retarded one. Politically, it's a mess—fifty different nations quarrelling and cutting each other's throats. The New Empire avoids open contact with such worlds. It just isn't worth the trouble."

"All right," said Banning. He made a gesture of defeat. "I'll accept the star-ship, the civilization, the—what did you call it?—New Empire. But where do *I* come into all this?"

"You're part of it. A very important—I might even say pivotal —part of it."

"You have the wrong man," said Banning wearily. "I told you, my name is Neil Banning, I was born in Greenville, Nebraska—"

He stopped, and Rolf laughed. "You were having a pretty hard time proving that. No. You're Kyle Valkar, and you were born at Katuun, the old King City on the fourth world of Antares."

"But my memories — my whole life on Earth!"

"False memories," said Rolf. "The scientists of the New Empire are experts in mental techniques, and Jommor is the best of them. When Earth was chosen as your place of exile, and you were brought there, a captive, with your own memory already blanked out, Jommor compiled a life-history for you, synthesized from the minds of the natives. When it was implanted carefully in your mind, and you were set free with a new name, a new speech, a new life, Kyle Valkar was gone forever, and there was only the Earthman Neil

Banning, no longer a menace to anyone."

Banning said slowly, "Menace?"

"Oh, yes." Rolf's eyes blazed suddenly with a savage light. "You're a Valkar, the last of them. And the Valkars have always been a menace to the usurpers of the New Empire."

He began to move about nervously, as though the excitement he had in him was more than he could control. Banning stared at him blankly. He had had too many shocks, too close together, and things were just not registering any more.

"The *New* Empire," Rolf repeated. He made the adjective a bitter curse. "With that cat Tharanya at its head, and the craft of Jommor holding her up. Yes, the last Valkar was a menace to them."

"But why?"

Rolf's voice rolled. "Because the Valkars were the kings of the *Old* Empire, the star-empire that ruled half the galaxy, ninety thousand years ago. Because the star-worlds have not altogether forgotten their rightful kings."

Banning stared, and then he began to laugh a little. The dream had become too preposterous, too crazy. You couldn't take it seriously any more.

"So I'm not Neil Banning of Earth. I'm Kyle Valkar, of the stars."

"You are."

"And I'm a king."

"No, Kyle. Not yet. But you almost made it, the last time. If we succeed this time, you will be."

Banning said flatly, "I'm Banning. That I *know*. I may look like Kyle Valkar. That must be why you picked me up. Let me see the others."

Rolf's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"I'm going to tell them what kind of deception you're pulling."

The big dark man spoke between his teeth. "No you're not. They think you're Kyle Valkar. Well, you are. But they also think you've got your memory back—which you haven't."

"Then you admit you're deceiving them?" Banning demanded.

"Only in that one matter. Kyle, they wouldn't follow on this venture if they thought you were still without memory! They'd know you couldn't take them to The Hammer."

"The Hammer?"

"I'll tell you of it later. Right now, get this through your skull. If they suspect you *don't* remember, they'll abandon this venture. You'll go back to Jommor. This time, it'll not be exile for you—but death."

There was a deadly earnestness about Rolf. Banning tried to think.

Then he said, "I can't speak that language of yours."

"No. Jommor did a nice clean job on you."

"Then how can I pass myself off as your Valkar?"

Rolf answered obliquely, "You are in bad shape, Kyle. Fetching your memory back has given you a shock You'll need to keep in this cabin, for quite a while. But I'll be here with you a lot."

For a moment Banning didn't get it, then he understood. "You mean, I'm to learn the language from you?"

"*Re*-learn it. Yes."

Banning said, after a moment, "All right. If there's nothing else I can do—"

He was turning as he said it, and of a sudden he was on Rolf's broad back, his forearm around the dark man's neck in a strangle-hold, squeezing.

Rolf gasped, "Sorry, Kyle—" And then his massive muscles seemed to explode like bursting springs, and Banning found himself hitting the cabin wall with a crash. He lay, the breath knocked out of him.

Rolf unlocked the door. He turned a moment and said dourly, "I'd have been flayed alive for that, in the old King City. But it was a pleasure. Now cool down."

He went out.

Banning, left alone, sat and stared a long time without moving, at the metal wall. He felt that his mind was foundering, and he clawed for a grip on reality.

"I am Neil Banning, and I am merely dreaming—"

He struck the wall with his clenched fist. His knuckles bruised convincingly. Blood showed on them. No—that wouldn't work.

"All right, this ship is real. A star-ship, going to Antares. Rolf is real, and this New Empire—a star-empire that Earth doesn't dream of. But I'm *still* Neil Banning!"

Not Kyle Valkar—no! If he let himself believe that he was another man completely, a man from far star-worlds with a past he couldn't remember, then his own personality, his own self, would waver and vanish like smoke and he would be nothing—

The Empire existed. The star-ships existed. Earth didn't know of them, but they obviously knew about Earth, knew its ways and languages from secret visits. This ship, Rolf, had made such a secret visit. They had come, they had taken Neil Banning, and now they were going away again. There was a purpose in that—

They needed, for some vast star-intrigue, a man who could pose as Kyle Valkar. *The* Valkar,

the descendant of ancient star-kings. And he, Banning, by physical resemblance could play the part. He was to be a pawn in their intrigue, and he'd be a better pawn if Rolf could convince him that he really *was* the Valkar.

Banning tried desperately to think what he must do. It was hard, for he still reeled from the impact of a newly-revealed universe, the unearthly shock of being in this ship. But he must, in this incredible predicament, fight for himself.

"Find out things," he thought. "Learn where you stand, what they're trying to do with you, before you attempt anything. You've got to know—"

Hours went by. The deep, almost inaudible drone was the only sound. Outside these metal walls was the primal abyss, and a billion suns. He must not think of that.

Rolf came back. He brought new clothing for Banning, like his own, outlandish but comfortable—and the rich fabric of the white tunic had a stylized sunburst symbol picked out in jewels on the breast. Banning put it on without objection. His mind was made up—he must learn, and learn fast.

"Now you look like the Valkar," grunted Rolf. "You've got to talk like him, too. And there's little enough time.

Rolf began, naming every object in the cabin in his own language. Banning repeated the words. And then the words for "star" and "king" and "Empire".

"Rolf."

"Yes?"

"This Old Empire, of which the Valkars were kings. You said that was ninety *thousand* years ago?"

"Yes. A long time. But it's still remembered, on all of the star-worlds except a few that sank back into complete savagery, like Earth."

Banning was startled. "Earth? It was part of that Old Empire?"

"It, and half of the galaxy." Rolf brooded. "When the crash came, when the Old Empire fell, it was the faraway fringe-worlds that lost contact most completely. No wonder their colonists soon sank to savagery, almost to apehood, as on Earth."

From the somber references that Rolf made, in this and the next visits, Banning began to piece together a vague picture, an undreamed-of cosmic history.

The Old Empire, the Empire of the Valkars! They had ruled it from Katuun at Antares, their starships had webbed the galactic spaces, and the peoples of a myriad suns paid tribute to their power. But there had long been murmur-

ings against the rule of these galactic lords, and more than one abortive rebellion. Finally, the Valkars themselves had precipitated a crisis.

Word spread that in a remote, inaccessible part of the galaxy, the Valkar lords were preparing a secret, terrible agency that would overawe all rebels in future. None knew its nature, or its powers. But rumor called it the Hammer of the Valkars, and said that with it the Valkars could destroy all the peoples in the galaxy if they wished.

That rumor detonated a cosmic rebellion! The peoples of the star-worlds would not let the Valkars attain such life-or-death power over them. They rose in revolution, and civil war rent the whole fabric of interstellar civilization and shattered the Old Empire. Many, many far systems and worlds, when the star-ships came no longer, sank into barbarism and a long night.

A few star-worlds retained their civilization, their technics. They kept a few star-ships flying. And those few worlds, centering around the system of Rigel, expanded their efforts to bring more and more worlds back into a cooperative civilization. Thus had begun the New Empire, which professed to reject the pride and pomp of conquest of the Old Empire, and to bring a new day of cooperation to all planets.

Rolf spat in hatred. "They and their hypocritical talk of friendliness and peace! They've won many over. But some still remember the old Valkar kings who made the stars their footstools!"

Banning said, "But the thing that brought on the rebellion—the thing you called the Hammer of the Valkars. What happened to that?"

Rolf looked at him gravely. "It has been lost, for all those ages. Only the Valkars knew where the Hammer was being prepared, and what it was. The clue to that secret was passed down from father to son, ever since the Old Empire fell. You were the only one who had that clue."

Banning stared. "So that's why Kyle Valkar is so pivotal a figure in all this!

Rolf said grimly, "That's why. You told me — and me alone— that the Hammer was on a world kept in Cygnus Cluster. You said that, with the star-maps of ninety thousand years ago, you could find that world."

The big man added somberly, "You almost succeeded, Kyle. You found the maps you needed in the archives at Rigel, you started out toward Cygnus Cluster. But Tharanya and Jommor overtook you, and destroyed your memory and

exiled you on faraway Earth, and now *nobody* knows the secret of the Hammer's hiding-place."

It sounded wildly incredible to Banning. He said so, and added, "Why wouldn't they have killed the one man who held such a secret, to make sure?"

Rolf said sardonically. "Jommor would have done so, and gladly. But Tharanya wouldn't. A woman — even one like Tharanya — shouldn't rule an Empire."

"And *you* are trying to overturn this New Empire?" Banning probed. "With just the few men in this ship?"

"There'll be others, Kyle. A message has been sent to them, and they'll gather at Katuun. Not many—but we'll be enough to pull down the Empire, if we have the Hammer."

"But you don't have it! And *I* know nothing of how to find it!"

"No, Kyle. But perhaps you soon will!"

When Banning tried to learn more, Rolf grunted, "Later. Right now, you must learn to speak. I've said that *I* restored your memory before we left Earth, and you're sick from the shock of that."

"The man who drove the car must know differently," Banning reminded.

"Eyre?" said Rolf. "He's safe, he's my man. But the others don't know. They're anxious to see you. You must appear soon, as Kyle Valkar."

Banning was learning the language fast. *Too* fast. For this language was enormously complex, showing every sign of vast age. Yet Banning picked it up easily. He reproduced Rolf's accent perfectly. It was as though his tongue and lips were used to shaping those sounds, as though this knowledge was already in his mind, dormant, needing only awakening.

He shrank from that thought. It would mean that Rolf was right, that the people of that Nebraska town had told truth, that Neil Banning didn't exist. He couldn't, he wouldn't, believe that. How could a man let his own self go? No, it was a trick, Rolf had somehow hypnotized the folk of that town—it was only a clever imposture he was being used for.

There was no day or night for Banning. He slept, ate, talked, and said, "They're waiting."

"Who?"

"My men. *Your* men, Kyle. You can speak well enough. You're coming out, I told them that you'd recovered."

Banning went cold. He had dreaded this moment. As long as he remained in the little cabin, he could postpone realization of his situation. Now he had to face it.

"Go along with it!" he told himself. "Find out for sure just what's behind Rolf's lies, before you make your move!"

The door was opened. Rolf stood aside, waiting for him to go first. He walked out into the corridor.

"This way," said Rolf's harsh voice, at his ear. "To the right. Get your head up. You're supposed to be the son of kings."

The corridor led into an officers' mess. A half-dozen men rose to their feet as Rolf said loudly, "The Valkar!"

They looked at Banning with desperate, hungry eyes. He knew he had to speak to them. But before he could, one wolf-faced man stepped forward. He spoke deliberately to Banning.

"You are not the Valkar."

IV

Silence, a seeming eternity of it, in which Banning stared into the dark wolfish face before him and felt his heart sink under an icy weight of apprehension. Well, that was that. They'd found him out. Now what? Rolf's warning came back to him — surrender, Jommor, death.

He thought desperately that he should speak, try to bluster his way out of it, but his tongue was stiff in his mouth. Before he could force it to make words, the wolf-faced man lifted his wine-glass high and shouted, "But you will be! We fought for you before, we'll fight again—and this time we'll see you back on your rightful throne. Hail, Valkar!"

"Hail, Valkar!"

The cry rang from the metal walls. Relief swept over Banning and the hawk-eyed, hard-handed officers misread the emotion on his face for something else and cheered again. From some inner corner of Banning's soul there came unexpectedly a sense of pride. For a moment it seemed only right and good that these men were giving him a chieftain's greeting. His back straightened. He looked at them, and said, "The Valkars have never lacked for good men. I—"

He faltered. The brief moment was gone, and he saw Rolf looking at him, satisfaction shading swiftly into anxiety.

Abruptly, Banning smiled. Rolf had got him into this. Let Rolf worry. Let him sweat. Let him loyally and abjectly serve the Valkar.

"Wine," he said. "I'll give my officers a pledge in return."

Rolf's eyes narrowed, but he put a wineglass in Banning's hand.

"Gentlemen," said Banning, "I give you the return of the Old Empire and the freedom of the stars!"

The response almost deafened him. He turned to Rolf and whispered in English, "Corny — but effective, don't you think?" He drained the glass.

Rolf laughed. It was genuine laughter, and Banning felt that he had done something that pleased Rolf instead of annoying him.

To the others Rolf said, "Jommor's cleverness failed. In spite of him, the Valkar is not changed. I know. I taught him his first lessons. He is still the Valkar."

He presented the officers one by one. Schrann, Landolf, Kirst, Felder, Burri, Tawn. They looked like hard, competent, devoted men. Banning did not think he would last long among them if they found out he was not the Valkar, but only Neil Banning of Nebraska. He was afraid of them, and fear sharpened his wits, finding words for his tongue and a lordly carriage for his head. He was amazed at how easy it was to be lordly.

He was beginning to think he might get away with it when a young orderly came into the messroom and snapped to attention so rigidly that Banning could almost hear his bones crack.

"Captain Behrent's compliments," he said, "and would the Valkar honor him by attending the bridge? We are now entering the Drift—"

A strident whistle from a speaker high in the wall drowned out the orderly's words. A voice followed the whistle, requiring all hands to take their stations.

The officers prepared to go. They laughed and said, "It was touch and go on the outward trip, but this time running the Drift will be easy with the Valkar at the helm."

"—entering the Drift," said the orderly with dogged determination, "and the Captain defers to—"

Between the whistling, the monotonous repetition of orders, and the jostling of the officers as they went out, the orderly gave up. He turned on Banning a look of pure hero-worship and said simply, "Sir, we'd all feel safer with *you* as our pilot now."

Oh, God, thought Banning, and looked despairingly at Rolf. Rolf smiled, and when the orderly stepped back, he said, "Oh, yes, you're a space pilot, one of the greatest. To be a king of stars, you must be a master of space, and you were trained to it like all the Valkars, from childhood."

"But *I* can't — "Banning babbled.

There was no time for more, for the orderly was holding the door open. He went through it, with Rolf, feeling trapped and helpless.

Rolf

He entered the bridge.

It was an overwhelming place, and for the first time the complete and prosaic reality of the star-ship was borne in upon him. Before, it had been a room, a glimpse through an incredible window, and an intellectual acceptance of something that all his former training denied. Now it became a terrifying actuality in which men lived and worked, and gambled on their skill that they would not die.

The low broad room was crammed with instrument panels, tensely watched by the crew's technicians. In the center of the space an officer sat half surrounded by a ground-glass screen across which moved a constant stream of figures and symbols. Under his hands was a thing that resembled an organ keyboard, and Banning guessed that this was the heart and nerve-center of the ship. He hoped the man knew how to play it. He hoped it very much, because the big curving view-plates that opened up the front and two sides of the bridge revealed a view of interstellar space which even an utter greenhorn like himself could recognize as appalling.

A man with a lined bulldog face and white hair cropped to his skull turned and saluted Banning. He wore a dark tunic with a symbol of rank on his breast, and he did not look as though he were accustomed to defer to anyone in the handling of his ship. Yet it was without a trace of irony or anger that he said to Banning, "Sir, the bridge is yours."

Banning shook his head. He was still staring at the viewplates. At an oblique angle, the ship was speeding toward an area that stretched like a cloud across space. It was dark, occluding the stars, and yet it swarmed with little points of brightness, firefly motes that danced and flickered, and Banning knew that this must be one of those clouds of cosmic drift that he had read about in articles on astronomy, and that the bright motes were the bigger chunks of debris across its front, catching the light that blazed from all the

suns of heaven.

It dawned on him that they were going into that.

The captain looked at him. So did the officer at the control-bank, and the technicians at the instrument panels, in swift, darting glances. There was a sickness in Banning, and a very great fear.

Words came to him from somewhere. He said to Behrent, almost genially, "A man's ship is as close as his wife, Captain. I would not come between either of them." He pretended to study the panels, the ground-glass screen, the control-bank, as though he knew all about them. "And if I did," he went on, "I could do no more than you've done already."

He stepped back, making a vague and gracious gesture that might have meant anything, and hoped that his hand was not too obviously shaking.

"Certainly," he said, "Captain Behrent needs no instructions from anybody."

A flush of pride spread over Behrent's leathery face. His eyes glowed. "At least," he said, "do me the honor to remain."

"As a spectator," said Banning. "Thank you." He sat down on a narrow seat that ran underneath the starboard port, and Rolf stood beside him. He could sense that Rolf was wryly amused, and he hated him even more. Then his gaze was drawn to the port. For a moment he wished desperately that he could take refuge in his cabin, where all this was shut out. And then he thought, No, it was better to be here where you could at least see it coming.

The leading edge of the Drift rushed toward them like a black wave, all aglitter with the flashing of the cosmic flotsam that wandered with it.

Rolf said casually in English, close to his ear, "It's the only way to avoid the Empire's radar net. They watch the spaceways rather thoroughly, and we'd have a hard time explaining our business."

The wave, the Drift, the solid wall of black was right on top of them. Banning shut his jaws tight down on a yell.

They hit it.

There was no shock. Naturally. It was only dust, with the bits of rock scattered through it. Quite tenuous, really, not anything like as dense as a prairie dust-storm—

It got dark. The blazing sea of stars was blotted out. Banning strained his eyes into the viewplate and saw a faint glimmering, a whirling shape as big as a house bearing down on them. He started to cry out, but the officer's hand had moved on the control-bank, and the plunging shape was gone,

or rather, the ship was gone from it. There was no inertia-shock. The field-drive took care of that.

Rolf said quietly, "What that boy said was true, you know. You *are* the finest pilot here."

"Oh, no," whispered Banning. "Not I."

He clutched the back of the seat with sweating hands and watched for what seemed hours, as the ship dodged and reeled and felt its way through the nighted Drift, while the chunks of interstellar rubbish hurtled silently past, little things no bigger than rifle bullets, huge things as big as moons, all of them deadly if they hit. None of them did, and Banning's fear was drowned finally in awe. If Captain Behrent could take a ship through this, and still bow to the Valkar as a spaceman, the Valkar must really have done something miraculous.

They came out at last into a "lead", a clear path between two trailing fringes of the Drift. Behrent came to stand before Banning. He smiled and said "We're through, sir."

And Banning said, "Well done." He meant it. He would have liked to get down before this incredible starship man and embrace his knees.

Rolf said, "I think we all need sleep."

When they were back in Banning's cabin again, Rolf looked at him and nodded briefly. "You'll do. I was afraid Jommor might have taken your spirit along with your memory, but I guess even he couldn't manage that."

Banning said. "You were taking an awful chance. You should have briefed me a little better—"

"I won't be able to brief you on everything, Kyle. No, I had to find out if you still had your nerve and your mental resources. You do." He started out, turning in the doorway to smile half sadly. "Better get your rest, Kyle. We raise Antares in thirteen hours, and you'll need it."

"Why?" asked Banning with sudden apprehension born of something in Rolf's voice.

"A kind of test, Kyle," he answered. "I'm going to prove to you once and for all that you *are* the Valkar."

He went out, leaving Banning to a slumber that was something less than easy.

Hours later, Banning stood again on the bridge with Rolf, and watched his first landing, filled with awe and laden with a sense of doom. Antares overpowered him, a vast red giant of a sun that dwarfed its small companion star to insignificance. It filled all that quarter of

space with a sullen glare that made it seem as though the ship swam in a sea of blood, and the hands and faces of the men in the bridge were dyed red with it, and Banning shuddered inwardly. He dreaded the landing on Katuun.

He dreaded it even more when he actually saw the planet, wheeling toward them through the sombre glare—a dim shadowy world, with a lost look about it as though men had left it long ago.

"It was mighty once," said Rolf softly, as though he read Banning's thoughts. "The heart and hub of the Old Empire, ruling half a galaxy—the throne-world of the Valkars. It can be mighty again."

Banning looked at him. "If you can find the Hammer and use it against the New Empire, is that it?"

"That's it, Kyle," said Rolf. "That's what you're going to do."

"I?" cried Banning. "You're mad, man! I'm not your Valkar! Even if I were, how could I find the Hammer with all memory of it gone?"

"Your memory was taken from you by Jommor," said Rolf grimly. "He could restore it."

Banning was stunned to silence. Only now did he begin to understand the scope and daring of Rolf's plans.

The ship sped in toward the planet. It touched the atmosphere, and was swallowed in a bloody haze that thickened and darkened until Banning felt smothered with it, and more and more oppressed.

Details of the world began to show, gaunt mountain ranges, dark areas of forest that spread unbroken across whole continents, sullen oceans and brooding lakes. Rolf had said that Katuun was almost deserted now, but a man from Earth found it difficult to picture a whole world truly empty of cities, commerce, sound and people. Looking at it as the ship dropped lower down a long descending spiral, he found it inexpressibly grim and sad.

It grew even more so as he began to see that there were ruins in the emptiness, white bones of cities on the edges of the seas and lakes, vast clearings in the forest where the trees had not been able to grow because of pavements and mounds of fallen stone. There was one enormous barren patch that he knew instinctively had once been a spaceport, busy with the ships from countless stars.

A line of mountains sprang up ahead, lifting iron peaks into the sky. The ship dropped, losing speed, levelling out. A plateau spread out below the mountains, a natural landing field. Without shock or jar, the star-ship came to

rest.

It seemed to be expected of Banning that he lead the way out onto this, his world. He did so, with Rolf at his side, walking slowly, and again it all seemed a dream. The sky, the chill, fresh wind with strange scents upon it, the soil beneath his feet — they cried their alienage to him and he could not shut his senses.

The officers followed them out, and Captain Behrent looked anxiously at the sky. "None of the others are here yet."

"They will be soon," said Rolf. They have to find their own secret ways to this rendezvous. It takes time."

He turned to Banning. "From here," he said in English, "you and I will go on alone."

Banning looked down. A broad, time-shattered road led into the valley below. There was a lake there, and beside the lake was a city. The forest had grown back where it could, thick clumps of alien trees and mats of unearthly vines and creepers, but the city was vast and stubborn and would not be eclipsed. The great pillars of the gate still showed, and beyond them the avenues and courts and roofless palaces, the mighty arches and the walls, all silent in the red light, beside the still, sad lake.

They went down that road in silence. They left the wind behind them on the high land, and there was no sound but their own footsteps on the broken paving-blocks. Antares hung heavy in the sky he thought of as "west." To Banning, used to a small bright sun, it seemed a vast and dim and crushing thing encumbering the heavens.

It was warmer in the valley. He could smell the forest, but the air was clean of any man-made taint. The city was much closer now. Nothing moved in it, nor was there any sound.

Banning said, "I thought you told me there was still *some* life here."

"Go on," Rolf answered. "Through the gate."

Banning turned to look at him. "You're afraid of something."

"Maybe."

"What? Why did we come here alone?" He reached out suddenly and grasped Rolf by his tunic collar, half throttling him. "What are you leading me into?"

Rolf's face turned utterly white. He did not lift a hand, did not stir a muscle in Banning's angry grip. He only said, in a voice that was little louder than a whisper, "You are sealing my death-warrant. For God's sake, let me go, before the—"

He broke off, his gaze sliding

past Banning to something beyond him.

"Be careful, Kyle," he murmured. "Be careful what you do now, or we're both dead men."

V

The simple conviction in his voice assured Banning that this was no trick. He relaxed his grip on Rolf, feeling his spine go cold with the knowledge that something stood behind him. Very cautiously, he turned his head.

Rolf said, "Steady on. It's been ten years since they saw you last. Give them time. Above everything, don't run."

Banning did not run. He stood immobile, frozen, staring.

Creatures had come out through the city gate. They had come very silently while he was occupied with Rolf, and they had thrust out a half circle beyond the two men that made flight impractical. They were not human. They were not animal, either. They were not like anything Banning had ever seen in or out of nightmare. But they looked fast, and strong. They looked as though they could kill a man quite easily, without even working up a sweat.

"They're yours," Rolf whispered. "Guardians and servants and devoted dogs to the Valkars. Speak to them."

Banning looked at them. They were man-sized but not man-shaped. Bunched, hunched bodies with several legs, spidery and swift and scuttling. There was no hair on them, only a smooth greyish skin that was either naturally patterned or tattooed in brillant colors and intricate designs. Beautiful, really. Nearly everything has some beauty, if you look for it—

Nearly everything—

"What shall I say?"

"Remind them that they're yours!"

Small round heads and faces—child faces, with round chins and little noses and great round eyes. What was it looked back at him out of those eyes?

The creatures stirred and lifted their long, thin arms. He glimpsed a glint of cruel talons. One of them stood in front of the others, as a leader stands, and it spoke suddenly in a sweet, shocking whisper.

"Only the Valkar may pass this gate," it said. "You die."

And Banning said, "Look closer. Are your memories so short?"

What was it in their eyes? Wisdom? Cruelty? Alien thoughts that no human mind could know?

"Have you forgotten me?" he cried. "In ten short years, have you forgotten the Valkar?"

Silence. The great white mono-

liths that marked the gate reared up their broken tops, and on them were carvings, half obliterated, of the same spidery warders that guarded them still.

They moved, with a dry swift clicking of their multiple feet, their hands reaching out toward Banning. He knew that those talons could tear him to ribbons with unearthly swiftness. There was no safety in flight or struggle, he must put his life on the gamble. He held out his hands toward them, forcing himself to greet them.

"My spiderlings," he said.

The one who had spoken before, the leader, voiced a shrill, keening cry. The others picked it up, until the stone walls of the city threw it back in wailing echoes, and now Banning saw quite clearly what it was that looked at him out of those round child eyes. It was love. And suddenly, that transfiguring emotion made them less hideously alien to his eyes. The leader caught his hand and pressed it against its grey, cool forehead, and the physical contact did not shock him. And this, in its own way frightened him.

"What is it?" he asked of Rolf in English. Rolf laughed, with relief strong now in his voice.

"Sohmsei used to rock your cradle and ride you on his back. Why would you be afraid of him?"

"No," said Banning stubbornly. "No, I don't believe that. I can't."

Rolf stared at him incredulously. "You mean that even now you can doubt—But they know you! Listen, Kyle — millenia ago the Valkars brought the Arraki from the world of a fringing star far out on the Rim. They have loved and served the Valkars ever since. They serve no one else. The fact that you're alive this minute is proof of who you are."

Sohmsei's gaze slid sidelong, and he whispered to Banning, "I know this one, called Rolf. Is it your will that he live, Lord?"

"It is my will," said Banning, and a deep doubt assailed him. These creatures, the ease with which he had learned the language, the instinctive knowledge of what to do that came to him at times from outside his conscious mind, the enigma at Greenville—could it be true? Was he really the Valkar, lord of this city, lord of a ruined empire that once had spanned the stars?

No. A man had to cling to some reality, or he was lost. Neil Banning was real, life as he had known it was real. The Arraki were unhuman, but not supernatural. They could be fooled, like men, by a resemblance. Rolf had chosen a convincing substitute,

that was all.

He said as much, in English, and Rolf shook his head. "Obstinacy was always your biggest fault," he said. "Ask Sohmsei." Dropping into his own tongue again, he went on, "This is your homecoming, Kyle. I leave you to it. The others will be arriving soon, and I must be on the plateau to meet them. I'll bring the captains here, when all have come."

He saluted the Arraki and went away up the broken road. Banning looked after him briefly. Then he forgot him. All his fear was gone and he was eager to see the city.

"Will you go home now, Lord?" asked Sohmsei in a wistful whisper.

"Yes," said Banning, "I will go home."

He strode in through the ruined gate, with Sohmsei on his right hand and the others clustering round in a piping, scuttling, adoring crowd. He could feel the adoration like an almost tangible wave, and he thought that the ancient Valkars had done well in picking their bodyguards. These could be trusted.

How much, and how far, he was to find out later.

The city was enormous, a Babylon of the stars, and when it was in its glory it must have blazed splendidly with light and color, and roared with sound, and glittered with wealth of countless worlds. Banning could picture the embassies coming down that ruined road, princes from Spica and kings from Betelgeuse and half-barbaric chieftains from the wild suns of Hercules, to bend their knees in the King City of the Valkars. And now there was only silence and the red twilight of Antares to fill the streets and the shattered palaces.

"It will live again," whispered Sohmsei, "now that you are home."

For some reason, Banning answered, "Yes."

A great avenue ran inward from the gate. Banning followed it, striding over the sunken paving blocks, and the feet of his escort clicked and rustled on the stone. Ahead, on the very edge of the lake and dominating the whole city by its sheer size and might, was a palace of white marble. Banning went toward it. The avenue widened into a mighty concourse flanked on either side by statues of tremendous size. A grim smile touched Banning's lips. Many of the figures had fallen to block the way, and those that still stood were mutilated by the brutal hand of Time. But when they all stood whole and sound, mighty figures reaching out toward

the stars and grasping them with proud hands, they must have dwarfed any human embassy into insignificance, driving home to them the overwhelming strength of the Empire, so that they would reach the throne-room with sufficiently chastened minds.

Now the hands of the statues were broken and the stars had fallen from them, and the eyes that watched Banning's passage were blind and filled with dust.

Banning mounted the steps of the palace.

"Lord," said Sohmsei, "since you left the inner porch has fallen. Come this way—"

He led Banning to a smaller door at one side. Behind it there was wreck and ruin. Great blocks of stone had fallen, and the main vault of the roof was open to the sky. But the inner arches still stood, and fragments of fretted galleries, and wonderful carvings. The main hall, he thought, might have held ten thousand people, and at the far end, dim and shadowy in the blood-red light, he saw a throne. And he was astonished, for he felt now a hot, angry sense of wrong.

Sohmsei scuttled ahead, and Banning followed, picking his way among the fallen stones.

There was a ruined gallery, and then a lower wing directly on the lake. Banning guessed that here had been the personal apartments of the Valkars. The wing was in fairly good repair, as though long efforts had been made to keep it habitable, and when he entered it he saw that it was clean and cared for, the furniture and hangings all in place, every ornament and trophy polished bright.

"We have kept it ready," Sohmsei whispered. "We knew that some day you would return."

"You have done well," said Banning, and shook his head irritably—this pilgrimage was having too disturbing an effect on his emotions. But Sohmsei only smiled.

Slowly Banning wandered through the deserted rooms. Here, more than anywhere else in the city, he was conscious of the weight of centuries of unbroken rule, of pride and tradition, and of the human individuals, the men and women who had made it so. It came out here in little things, in personal belongings, in portraits and curios and all manner of objects collected over the centuries from other lands and stars, used and treasured and lived with. It was sad to see them as they were now, lost and forgotten except by the Arraki who had guarded them—

There was one room with tall windows looking out over the lake.

The furnishings, now a little ragged, were rich but plain. There were books, and maps, and star-charts and model ships and many other things. There was a massive table, and beside it was a chair, not new. Banning sat down in it, and the worn places received his body with comfortable familiarity. Through a door to his right was another room with a great tall bed that bore the sunburst symbol on its purple curtains. On the wall at his left, between the bookshelves, was a full-length portrait —of himself.

A cold fear caught him, deep inside. He felt Neil Banning begin to slip away, as a veil is drawn away to show another face, and he sprang up again, turning his back on the portrait, on the chair that fitted him too well, on the bed with the royal hangings. He held on hard to Neil Banning, and strode out onto the terrace, beyond the windows, where he could breathe again, and think more clearly.

Sohmsei followed him.

They were alone in the red twilight, looking down at the darkening lake. And Sohmsei murmured, "You come home as your father years ago came home. And we Warders were glad, since not for many generations had our lords been with us, and we were lonely."

"Lonely?" A strange pathos touched Banning's heart. These unhumans, faithful to their lords the Valkars through all the dead ages after the fall of empire, waiting on this ruined world, waiting and hoping—And finally a Valkar had come back. Rolf had told him, of how Kyle Valkar's father had returned to the old throne-world that all others shunned in fear, that his son might be born to the memory of the Valkar greatness.

"Lord," Sohmsei was whispering, "on the night when you were born, your father laid you in my arms and said, 'He is your charge, Sohmsei. Be his shadow, his right arm, the shield at his back'."

Banning said, "And you were that Sohmsei."

"I was," said Sohmsei. "After your parents died, I was that. I hated even Rolf, because he could teach you man-arts that I could not. But now, Lord, you are different."

Banning started a little. "Different?"

"Yes, Lord. You are the same in body. But your mind is not the same."

Banning stared into the dark strange eyes, the wise unhuman loving eyes, and a deep shudder shook him. And then there was a sound in the sky and he looked up to see a bright mote flash

across the vast face of Antares, sinking in the west. The mote swept in and became a ship, and vanished out of sight beyond the palace, and Banning knew that it had landed on the plateau.

It seemed cold to Banning, very cold, as though the dusky lake exhaled a chill.

You must not tell the others that my mind is different, Sohmsei," he whispered. "If it is known, it could be my death."

Another ship dropped down, toward the plateau, and then another. It was growing dark.

"They will not know," said Sohmsei.

Banning still felt cold. These alien Arraki, then, had parapsychic powers of some kind? And this one had sensed that mentally he was not the Valkar?

Presently, into the darkening rooms with a swift, rustling rush came another of the Arraki, smaller and lighter than Sohmsei, and less brilliantly marked.

"It is Keesh, my son," said Sohmsei. "He is young, but he shows some promise. When I am dead, he and his will serve the Valkar."

"Lord," said Keesh, and bowed his head. "The man Rolf, and others, come. Many others. Shall the Warders let them enter?"

"Let them enter," Banning said. "Bring them here."

"Not *here*," said Sohmsei. "It is not fitting. A Valkar receives his servants on his throne."

Keesh sped away. Sohmsei led Banning back through the darkening shadowy rooms and ruins. He was glad of the guidance as he stumbled over the broken blocks. But in the great main hall, Arraki with torches were now entering.

The gusty red torchlight was almost lost in that vast, ruined gloom. But through the great rent in the ceiling. two ghost-like ocher moons now shed a faint low. By the uncertain light, Banning followed Sohmsei to the black stone seat. It was uncarved, stark—its very lack of ornament speaking a pride too great for show. Banning took his seat upon it, and a great whispering sigh went up from the Arraki.

It would be easy, Banning thought, sitting in this place to imagine oneself a king. He could look past the ruined porch, down that great avenue of colossi, and see other Arraki torches approaching with Rolf and the others. Easy to imagine that those were great princes of distant suns, nobles and merchants of the mighty galactic empire of long ago, bringing the tribute of far-off worlds to their king—

King? King of shadows, postur-

ing here in a dead throne-city on a ruined, lost world! His subjects only the Arraki, the dogs of the Valkars who had stayed faithful though the stars crashed. His royalty only a poor pretense, a phantom like the long-dead empire of old—

Banning's hands clutched the cold stone arms of the throne. He was thinking too much like the Valkar he was supposed to be.

"*You're* no king or king's blood," he told himself fiercely. "You're Rolf's pawn, an Earthling he'll use for his own plans—if you let him."

Flanked by the torches, Rolf and at least twenty other men came down the great hall. They looked askance uneasily at the Arraki as they came. The dread of the Warders was still alive, and it was plain to see why this old king-world was visited by few.

Banning could see their faces now. Except for Captain Behrent and some of the officers from his own ship, they were all strangers to him, and they were a mixed lot. Some had the look of honest fighting-men, soldiers devoted to a cause. Others looked like arrant jailbait with no loyalty to anything but their own greed. They stopped ten paces away, looking up at the dark throne on which Banning sat with Sohmsei hovering back in the shadows.

"Hail, Valkar!" Behrent gave the salutation, and the others made it a ragged cheer.

Rolf stepped up toward the throne. He spoke in a low voice, in English. "Let me handle them. I think I've won them over."

Banning demanded in an angry whisper, "Won them over to what?"

"To a raid on Rigel," Rolf answered evenly. "We're going there, Kyle. Jommor is there, and he can restore your memory. And when you remember again, we'll have the Hammer."

Banning was stricken dumb by the overwhelming boldness of the proposal. Rigel, the capital of the New Empire—to raid it secretly, with a handful of men — sheer madness!

It flashed across his mind that Rolf, then, *did* believe him to be the Valkar or he would not have made this plan. Or else, Rolf was playing an even deeper game of deception than he could fathom—

Rolf had made an elaborate bow, and was turning to present the captains.

Sohmsei murmured suddenly, "Lord, beware! There is treachery here—and death!"

Banning started. He remembered the strange parapsychic sense the Arraki had already showed. He

felt his body go cold and tense.

Rolf had straightened, and his voice rolled through the great hall as he said loudly to Banning, "I've told them what you plan to do, Kyle! And I think every captain here will follow you!"

VI

A roar of assent followed Rolf's words, and one of the strange captains, a lean dark smiling man with a face so marked by facile wickedness that it fascinated Banning, sprang forward to rest his knee on the base of the throne and say, "I'll follow any man who will lead me to the stealing of an Empress! Jommor alone would have been no little task, but Tharanya too—!" He laughed. "If you can dream that big, Valkar, you may very well upset the throne."

Only the tense need for caution aroused in him by Sohmsei's whispered warning kept Banning from showing his astonishment. To raid the captial, to force Jommor to do something, was one matter — but to lay hands upon its sovereign was another. And then, from that obscure dark place inside himself, another thought came and said to him, *Tharanya is the answer—take her and you can take the stars!*

Banning thought that whatever Rolf's failings might be, lack of boldness was not one of them.

The dark man at his feet reached up. "I am Horek, with the light cruiser *Starfleet* and one hundred men. Give me your hand, Valkar."

Banning glanced aside at Sohmsei. "This one?"

The Arraki shook his head. His eyes brooded on the captains, bright and strange.

Banning leaned forward and said to Horek, "Suppose I overset the Empire—what will you ask for your help?"

Horek laughed. "Not gratitude. I have no heart to follow, so I follow gold instead. Is that understood?"

Banning answered, "Fair enough," and gave him his hand.

Horek stepped back, and Banning said to Rolf, "You haven't told them the details of the plan?"

Rolf shook his head. "That remains for a full council, after they have pledged themselves."

Banning said cynically, "That was wise."

Rolf looked at him. "I am wise, Kyle. And it won't be long before you understand how wise."

Another captain had come up, and Rolf said smoothly, "You remember Varthis, who fought for you before."

"Of course," lied Banning. "Welcome, Varthis." And he gave his hand again. Varthis was one of the

honest-looking ones, the old soldier loyal to a lost cause. Banning thought of Bonnie Prince Charlie, and hoped that his own venture would come to a better end. Because it was his venture now, like it or not. Rolf had seen to that, and the only way to get out of it alive was to win. So he would win, if it were humanly or superhumanly possible. His conscience did not reproach him very much. After all, Tharanya and Jommor and the New Empire were only names to him.

He was beginning to enjoy this sitting on a throne.

The captains came up one by one and took his hand, the rogues and the honest men, and with each one Banning glanced at Sohmsei, who watched and seemed to listen. After a while there were only four left. Banning searched their faces. Three of them looked as though they would sell their own mothers, and Banning knew it must be one of these. The fourth was already bending his knee, a broad-faced, sober-looking man in a neat uniform tunic and Rolf was saying easily, "Zurdis covered your retreat at—"

Suddenly, with a thin, blood-chilling cry, Sohmsei sprang, and set his taloned fingers around Zurdis' throat.

A startled sound went up from the men who were in the throne-hall. They moved uneasily, and the Arraki stirred in the shadows, coming forward. Banning rose.

"Quiet! And you, my spiderlings—be still!"

Silence came over the hall, as tight as a bow-string. He could hear Rolf's harsh breathing beside him, and below on the steps of the throne Zurdis knelt and did not move, his face the color of ashes. Sohmsei smiled.

"It is this one, Lord."

Banning said, "Let him stand."

Reluctantly Sohmsei took his hands away. Tiny blood-drops stood red on the captain's thick brown throat, where the talons had pricked the skin.

"So," said Banning. "It was left to one of my own men, my honored captains to betray me."

Zurdis did not answer. He looked at Sohmsei, and at the distant door, and back again at Banning.

"Tell me," Banning said. "Talk fast, Zurdis."

Zurdis said, "It's all a lie. Call off this beast! What right has it—"

"Sohmsei," said Banning softly.

The Arraki reached out delicately, and Zurdis squirmed and screamed. He went down on his knees again.

"All right," he said. "All right, I'll tell you. Yes, I sold you out,

why not? What did I ever get from you but wounds and outlawry? When Rolf sent word to me of this gathering, I sent word to Jommor. There's a cruiser standing off Katuun now, waiting for my signal! I was to learn your plans, your strength, and who was with you—and above all, whether you were truly the Valkar come back, or only an impostor, a puppet with Rolf to pull the strings?"

"Well?" said Banning, his heart suddenly beating fast.

Zurdis' face, still bloodless and very grim, twisted into a caricature of a smile.

"You're the Valkar, all right. And I suppose you'll give your filthy Arraki brutes the pleasure of flaying me alive. But it will do you little good. The cruiser would prefer to hear from me, but if they don't they'll come in anyway, and take their chances. It's a Class-A heavy. I don't think they'll come to much harm."

A cry of dismay went up from the captains. Banning could hear Rolf swear under his breath. Then one of the men shouted, "We can still take off, while the cruiser waits for his message!"

A general movement started toward the door. Banning knew that if they left him here, his life would pay forfeit. That knowledge lent him desperate determination. He must play the Valkar now to the hilt, for his neck! He stopped their movement, with a shout.

"Wait! And have them hunt us down in space? Listen, I have a better idea!" He turned to Rolf. "Forget the old plan, throw it away. I have a new one. Listen, you idiots who call yourselves captains. We want to penetrate to the very heart of the Empire. We want to reach the very throne and snatch the Empress off it. What better way to do it than in one of their own ships?"

They began to get the idea. They thought it over, seeing the neat shape of it, liking it more and more. Zurdis looked up at Banning, doubt and a sudden hope showing in his eyes.

"They want a message," Banning said. "We'll give them one." He leaped down from the throne, gesturing to Zurdis as he passed. "Fetch him, Sohmsei. Alive! You others of the Arraki—follow me, and I'll show you how to strike a blow for the Valkar!" He lifted his head to grin defiantly at Rolf, still standing on the steps of the throne. "Are you coming?" he demanded.

Rolf let go a laugh of pure exultation. "Lord," he said, "I am at your heels!"

It was the first time he had given Banning that title.

Horek, the dark smiling man of the *Starfleet,* cried out shrilly, "Come on, you hounds — if you'd like to catch a crusier!"

They cheered and followed Banning out into the nighted streets, with the Arraki for link-boys to carry the torches. And Banning, seeing the ruins and the fallen colossi under the dim moons, hearing the footsteps and the voices and thinking of what lay ahead, thought secretly, *This is all a mad dream, and some day I'll wake from it. But meanwhile—*

He turned to Rolf and said in English, "Did you have a plan?"

"Oh, yes. An elaborate and very clever one, that might even have worked—but we'd have lost a lot of ships."

"Rolf."

"Yes?"

"What did you tell them, to get them into this?"

"Half the truth. I said that Jommor has the key to the secret of the Hammer, that he stole that from you. We have to get it back. I didn't think it necessary to explain that the key is actually your memory — which, of course, they believe you already have."

"Um. Rolf—"

"What now?"

"Don't make any more arrangements for me."

"After this," said Rolf quietly, "I think I could trust you to make your own."

Meanwhile, Banning thought, impostor or not he must keep playing the Valkar — if Neil Banning was not to die.

They passed the great gate of the city. Out on the ruined road, Banning stopped and looked back. The huge bulk of the palace showed at the far end of the avenue, alight with many torches—an eerie mockery of life in that dead, deserted place. He nodded and spoke to the Arraki, and to the captains. One by one their own torches went out, and men and not-men melted away into the jungle, leaving Banning alone with Rolf and Behrent and Horek of the *Starfleet,* and the two Arraki, Sohmsei and Keesh, who held Zurdis close between them.

They went up the ruined road to the plateau. And on the way Banning spoke seriously to Zurdis, who listened with great care.

"His men may decide to fight for him," Rolf said, and Banning nodded.

"Behrent and Horek can handle that, they'll have all the other crews behind them. Few men have any love for traitors."

Zurdis said sullenly, "I told no one else. Why share the gain? The men are all loyal to the Valkar."

"Good," said Banning, and then

told Behrent, "But make sure it's true!"

On the plateau, Banning made straight for his own ship and the radio room, with Rolf and Zurdis and the two Arraki. The operator on duty sprang up startled out of a half doze, and began frantically to work. Banning set Zurdis by the microphone, and Sohmsei beside him with the tips of his talons resting lightly on the captain's throat.

"He can hear your words before they're spoken," Banning said. "If he hears treason, you'll never live to speak it." He gestured sternly. "Go on."

A voice was already acknowledging the call. Slowly and very clearly, Zurdis said into the microphone, "Zurdis here. Listen — the man Rolf brought back is *not* the Valkar, and half the men suspect it. They are quarrelling about it now, in the throne-room of the palace. They're disorganized and completely off guard. There are no Arraki about, and if you land now in the jungle outside the city gate, you can grab the lot without any trouble."

"Good," said the voice. "You're sure this man is not the Valkar?"

"Sure."

"I'll send word at once to Jommor—he'll be relieved. In a way I'm sorry — it would have been more of an honor to me, to bring him in. Oh well, Rolf and a whole conspiracy can't be sneered at! We'll land in twenty minutes. You stand clear."

The microphone clicked. Zurdis looked at Banning.

Banning said to Sohmsei. "Is his mind clean?"

"Lord," answered the Arraki, "he is thinking now how he can warn the cruiser's men after they land, leaping swiftly out to get among them. He is thinking of many things he cannot hide, and none of them are good."

Banning said curtly, "Take him out."

They took him.

Banning turned savagely to Rolf. "I want no unnecessary killing when the cruiser lands. Make that understood!"

He went to his cabin and got the weapons Rolf had given him. The cerebro-shockers were short-ranged for hot work. These weapons were stocky pistols that fired explosive pellets. He wasn't sure he could use them, though Rolf had explained how it was done. When he went out, the men of the crews were drawn up and waiting. Keesh and Sohmsei took their accustomed places beside him. They were alone.

"All right," said Banning. "Quickly."

They plunged down into the dark bowl of the valley, under the ghostly ocher moons.

Presently Banning shouted, "Take cover! *Here she comes!*"

The black ranks of the forest trees swallowed them up. Overhead a huge dark shape was dropping swiftly down. Banning had a moment of panic, when it seemed certain that the giant bulk would crush him and all his men. Then he saw that it was only night and optical illusion, and the cruiser sank down with a splintering of breaking trees some hundred yards away — caught as he had planned it between his two forces. A great wind struck them, whipping the branches over their heads and whirling a storm of twigs and leaves in their faces. Then there was silence, and Banning went forward through the trees, with his men behind him.

The cruiser's men were already filing out, fully armed and in good order, but not expecting any trouble here, more concerned with picking their way through the dark and the broken trees. And then from nowhere Banning's forces hit them, and they were like the iron that lies between the hammer and the anvil. Banning shouted, and Sohmsei echoed him with a long wailing cry.

More men poured out of the cruiser's port. There was firing, with explosive pellets bursting like tiny stars, and much deadly floundering among the trees. The cruiser's floodlights came on, turning the landscape into a tangled pattern of white glare and black shadows, in which the shapes of men and Arraki swarmed in a wildly-shifting phantasmagoria. Banning raced for the cruiser, with Sohmsei and Keesh scuttering swiftly beside him, and more Arraki came in answer to the call, quick and eager as children running to play, their strange eyes shining in the light.

With Banning at their head, they swept in through the cruiser's open port, into the lock room, into the passageways, driving the surprised humans before them, trampling them under their swift-moving feet, sweeping the ship like a great broom. A few of them died, and others were wounded. But Banning knew that he had guessed right, and that these unhuman servitors were the strongest weapon he could use against men who had heard of them only in legends and old wives' tales. The sudden nightmare rush of Sohmsei's people out of the dark, the sound and sight of them, were enough to demoralize all but the bravest, and even the bravest went down before that resistless attack. The Arraki were

obedient. They avoided killing when they could. But they swept the ship clean, right up to the bridge, and Keesh and Sohmsei, under special orders, got to the radio room before the operator realized what was going on.

Banning returned to the port. He was breathing hard, and bleeding a bit, and his head was ringing with a wild excitement such as he had never even guessed at in the old days on Earth. Rolf came panting up, and Banning said, "It's done here."

Rolf grinned, wiping blood away where somebody had hit him in the mouth. "Here, too. We're just mopping up."

Banning laughed. He held out his hand, and Rolf took it, and they shook hands, laughing. The Arraki began to herd the men out of the cruiser, and on the ground the Valkar's men and the Arraki that were with them were rounding up the Empire men from among the trees. They looked bewildered and resentful, as though they did not yet understand what had happened to them.

Banning said, "And now?"

"Now," Rolf said, "It's Rigel for us, and Jommor—and you'll be Kyle Valkar again and your hand will grasp the Hammer."

Banning looked up at the sky, where the heart of Empire swung around its sun, far-off and unsuspecting.

VII

The heavy cruiser *Sunfire* sped across the star-gulfs, homing toward Rigel.

Outwardly, she was what she had always been— one of the swiftest, most powerful craft in space, with the Empire crest bright on her haughty bow; carrying a full complement of officers and men, all correctly clad in Imperial uniform and armed with Imperial arms. Inwardly, she was a stalking-horse, a delusion and a snare.

"All the manuals are here," said Rolf, "signal code and all. With any luck—"

Banning worded a careful message, in a very secret code, and had it flashed ahead by the hyperspace radio-signal system that took almost no time at all.

Returning with conspirators, respectfully suggest utmost secrecy. Request instructions. He signed it with the name of the *Sunfire's* captain, who was sitting it out under Arraki guard, back on Katuun.

An answer came back. *Come direct to Winter Palace. You are cleared through.* It was signed *Tharanya.*

Rolf smiled grimly. "The Win-

ter Palace—how very fitting! It was there they thought they had destroyed the Valkar, and now—they'll see! The palace is detached and quiet, with its own landing-field—"

"And very strong dungeons," said Horek. "Don't forget that."

"You'd better stay aboard the ship," Banning told him. "If they catch sight of your honest face, we'll all be under lock and key." He laughed. He was excited, growing more so with every star-league that dropped behind them. The venture itself was wild enough to get any man excited, but it was more than that. It was anticipation, and a name. *Tharanya.* He did not know why this should be, but it was so. Suddenly he wanted to see her, to hear her voice, to know what she looked like and how she moved.

"Always the boldest stroke," said Rolf softly. "She'll be there, not suspecting anything, all afire to see for herself whether or not this is really the Valkar. And Jommor will be with her. Even if his office as chief councillor didn't require it, he'd be there. He has his own reasons. He'll be anxious to assure himself that Zurdis told the truth." Rolf made a grasping motion with his hand. "And we'll have them both."

The mention of Jommor sent a little chill through Banning. He did not want to meet him. Jommor could be the last, the final, test, of the reality of Neil Banning, and Banning did not want to face that. He told himself savagely that there was nothing to fear, because he *was* Neil Banning and nobody could take that away from him. But still he was afraid.

Horek smiled, like a man who thinks of pleasant things. "When we have them," he said, "we have the secret of the Hammer. And with the Hammer, and a Valkar who knows how to wield it—" He made a gesture that could easily have taken in a universe.

The Hammer? Banning had been thinking about that, too. He had been looking at the guns of this cruiser, the great guns that fired powerful atom-shells far faster than light, sighted by hyperspace radar impulses. And these ordinary Imperial weapons seemed terrible to him. How much more terrible could be the mysterious Hammer that the whole galaxy had dreaded?

Sunfire sped onward, homing on a blazing star.

A tension grew within the ship. Behrent, who had once been of the Imperial Fleet, spent much time training his officers and crew to use the great guns, snarling at

their blunders, grimly reminding them that their lives might depend upon this. Banning slept little, sitting for endless hours with Rolf or Horek or the other captains, or brooding on the bridge. And always at his heels were Sohmsei and Keesh.

The two Arraki had refused to be left behind. "Lord," Sohmsei had said, "you went once without me, and the years of waiting were long."

They entered the outer web of patrols that protected the capital world. Twice, three times, and again they were challenged — a matter of routine, but one that could be deadly if the slightest thing occurred to rouse suspicions. But each time they identified themselves and were told to pass on. They reduced speed, timing their landing with a fine precision. Rigel burned with a bluish glare, but they were sweeping in toward the third planet, hunting its shadow.

"We want it dark," Rolf had said. "Good and dark. It'll give us just that much more advantage."

They passed the inner patrol ring and picked up the planetary beam. *Sunfire,* they said, *cleared for Destination B, Signal One!*

And the answer came back, *Proceed, Sunfire. All other shipping is standing clear.*

The shadow swallowed them, the bulk of the planet now made vast by its nearness, occluding the blaze of Rigel.

Banning's nervousness reached a fine-drawn edge and stopped there, leaving him strangely cold and calm. Neil Banning or Kyle Valkar—he had to go through with this, and it would tell him which man he really was!

The voices of the officers took on a subdued note. Below, the men were ready, under arms.

"Flight officers and crew will stay aboard," said Banning, "ready to take off—and I mean *ready,* not in minutes but in split-seconds." He looked around at Rolf and Horek and the other "conspirators", and at Landolph and Tawn, who were to play officers of the guard. "You have all the orders I can give you. The rest of it we'll have to make up as we go along. Good luck."

"Prepare for landing," said a metallic voice from the audio system. Banning glanced down through the port. They were sweeping low over a vast city that seemed to fill half a continent, glowing with lights of many collors. Beyond it, some distance beyond, in the surrounding darkness of the country, there was one isolated spot of brilliance.

"The Winter Palace," said Rolf, and Banning's heart gave one wild

leap. *Tharanya!* Then he said quietly, "We'd better get ready. Check your weapons, all of you, and see that they're well hidden. Use your shockers—no killing unless you have to. And remember—Tharanya and Jommor must be taken alive, and unhurt!"

To the two Arraki he said, "You must not be seen at first—stay well in the shadows until I call."

Tawn and Landolph assembled the guard, drawn up very soldierly in even ranks—a heavy guard because of the importance of the prisoners. Banning drew his mantle over his face and waited. His pulses hammered, and it was difficult to breathe.

The ship touched down.

Smartly, with a crisp calling of orders and a rhythmic tramp of boots, the guard marched out and down the landing ramp, with the prisoners in the center of a hollow square. They were joined by an additional detachment from the Palace Guard, and marched across the open area of the landing-field to the palace gate. Banning was glad to see that there were no other craft on the field, which had obviously been kept clear for the big cruiser. *Sunfire* would at least not be hampered at her getaway.

Their double escort swung them quickly across a section of the grounds, dappled with light and

Tharanya

shadow, toward a white portico that gave entrance to this southern face of the palace, a building of magnificent simplicity set among its trees and fountains. Banning studied it with a kind of nervous curiosity. Here, ten years ago, the Valkar had been brought a prisoner, to lose all memory under Jommor's scientific magic. Now, ten years later, there came another man, Neil Banning of the far-off planet Earth. They could not be the same man, and yet—

There was a cold chill on him, though the night was warm.

"Jommor's laboratory," whispered Rolf, with his head close to Banning's "is in the west wing—there."

"No talking among the prisoners!" said Landolph officiously,

and Horek cursed him. They passed in under the broad white portico. Just before they did so, Banning managed to glance over his shoulder, and he thought he glimpsed two shadows moving where the night was darkest among the ornamental trees.

There was a long, wide hall, severe and beautiful in some pale stone, with a floor of polished marble as black as some mountain tarn in winter, and seeming quite as deep. Tall doors opened at intervals along the walls, and at one side a splendid staircase sprang upward in one flawless curve. A man stood waiting in the hall, and on the staircase, caught halfway by their entrance, a woman looked down upon the prisoners and guards.

Banning saw the man first of all, and an ugly sense of hate leaped up inside him. He kept his face half covered with the edge of his cloak, and looked at Jommor, half surprised that he should be so young, and not at all the bent and bearded councillor, the scientist worn with years and study. This man was tall and muscular, with a high-boned face more suited to the sword than to the test-tube.

It was only in the eyes that Jommor betrayed the scientist and statesman. Looking into them, grey and steady and bright, Banning understood that he was facing a massive intellect—possibly, quite probably in fact, far beyond his own.

That thought was like a challenge, and something inside Banning snarled, *We'll see!*

Then the guards halted with a clang of weapons and a thunder of bootheels on the marble floor, and Banning lifted his gaze to the stairway and saw the woman. He forgot Jommor. He forgot the guards, the plan, the whole object of his being here. He forgot everything but Tharanya.

He stepped forward, so abruptly that he broke through his own men and almost through the palace guard before they caught him. He had let his mantle drop, baring his face, and he heard Jommor start and cry out under his breath. And then Tharanya had taken two steps down the stair and said a name.

She was beautiful. And she was angry. She seemed almost to glow with her anger and her hate, as though they were lamps inside her to gleam through her white flesh and put sparks in her blue eyes. And yet somehow Banning felt that underneath that hate was something else—

She came the rest of the way down the stairs, and she moved in just the way he had thought

she would, with a strong free grace that was more than touched with arrogance. He would have gone forward to meet her but the guards held him back, and he too became angry, and full of hate. Hate that blended somewhere into a quite different emotion.

But he was Neil Banning, and what could Tharanya of the stars mean to him?

"You fool," she said, "I gave you your life. Why couldn't you be content with it?"

Banning asked softly, "Is a man in my position ever content?"

She looked at him, and he thought that if she had had a knife at her girdle she would have stabbed him on the spot. "This time," she said, "I can't save you. And this time I would not, if I could."

Jommor moved. He came to stand beside Tharanya, and suddenly Banning remembered things that Rolf had told him, enough that he could see how matters stood with them, with all three of them — not the details, but the broad outlines, the basic situation. And he laughed.

"But you did save me before, little Empress, when you should not have. And you've waited for me all these years. Hasn't she, Jommor—in spite of all your urging that she take a consort? In all these ten long years, you still haven't quite managed to get your hands on her, or her throne!"

He moved fast, then, almost before the look of cold fury in Jommor's eyes told him that he had hit home—and yet not quite home, at that. There was something about the man, something striking and inescapable, and Banning recognized it. It was honesty. Jommor was sincere. It was not the throne he loved, it was Tharanya.

With a feeling very like respect, Banning launched himself at Jommor's throat.

He did it so swiftly and so violently that the guards, caught off balance, let him thrust them hard behind him with an outward sweep of his arms—and Banning's own men received them and pulled them off. Banning shouted, and the cry was echoed savagely under the vault of pale stone—"Valkar! Valkar!" The close-packed group of palace guards and prisoners and *Sunfire's* armed escort exploded suddenly into furious confusion. Banning saw Jommor's face go momentarily slack with astonishment. Then he cried out, "Go, Tharanya — it's you they're after! We can hold them—get help!"

Banning was on him, then, and he didn't say any more.

Tharanya turned and ran like a deer for the stairway. Her face was

white and startled, but she was not afraid. She bounded up the steps, calling imperiously for more guards. At intervals along the stair, in wall niches, were small heavy vases of sculptured stone. Tharanya picked one up and threw it, and then another. Banning laughed. Her hair had come loose from its gauzy net and was flying wild over her shoulders. It was as red as flame. He wanted her. He wanted to catch her himself, quickly, before she could vanish into those upper corridors and fetch more guards. He wanted to be done with Jommor.

But Jommor was strong. He had no weapon on him, and he was determined that Banning should not use his. They were struggling now for the shocker Banning had pulled from beneath his tunic, and it was an even match, especially when Banning dropped the shocker entirely. The fight was swirling around them, breaking up into smaller struggling groups, and Banning saw that he was going to be cut off completely from the stair. From outside came a turbulence of shots and cries as the main body of Banning's forces from the cruiser swept in and secured the grounds. Everything was going well, better than he could have hoped, but they must have Tharanya. Without her, their whole plan fell apart, and in another moment she would be gone. It would be a long task to search the whole palace, and who knew what secret ways their might be out of it? Monarchs usually took care never to be trapped.

But Jommor's powerful arms held him, and Jommor's voice said fiercely in his ear, "You're a madman, Valkar. She's beyond your reach!"

Banning arched his back and got one arm free. He hit Jommor, hard. Blood came out of the corner of his mouth and his knees sagged, but he did not let go. Tharanya had reached the top of the stair.

Jommor said, "You've lost."

Raging, Banning struck again, and this time Jommor stumbled and went down. But he pulled Banning with him, and he got his hand on Banning's throat, and they rolled among the trampling boots of the guards. And a blind fury came over Banning, something so deep and primitive that it had never heard of plans or reason. He got his own hands on Jommor's sinewy neck, and they tried to kill each other there on the marble floor until Rolf and Horek pulled them forcibly apart.

The hall was full of Banning's men now. The palace guards were laying down their arms. Gasping

painfully for breath, Banning looked toward the stair.

Tharanya had disappeared.

"We'd better find her," Rolf said. "Fast."

"The Arraki," Banning said, and shouted hoarsely. To Rolf he added, "Get some men together. And bring Jommor. We may need him."

He ran up the steps, and the two Arraki came racing to join him, down along the edge of the hall. "Find her," he said to them. "Find her!" And he sent them on ahead, like two great hounds to course an Empress.

The upper corridors were still. Too still. There must be guards, servants, some of the numberless, nameless people it takes to run a palace. Banning ran, his ears strained against the silence, and Keesh and Sohmsei, the many-footed shadows, sped far faster than he up and down the branching ways.

"Not here, " said Sohmsei eagerly. "Not here, nor here. Not—yes! *Here!*"

There was a door. Closed and quiet, like all the doors. Banning flung himself toward it. Keesh reached out and caught him fast.

"They wait," he said. "Inside."

Banning drew the pistol he had hoped he would not have to use. There was a window at the end of the corridor, close by. He looked out of it. The grounds were all quiet now below. *Sunfire* lay peacefully on the landing field. There was another window some twenty feet along the wall. He thought it must belong to the room."

He showed it to Sohmsei. "Can you get there?"

The Arraki laughed in his curious soft way. "Count three tens, Lord, before you break the door. Keesh!"

The two Arraki, dark spider-shapes in the gloom, slipped over the wide sill. Banning could hear the dry pattering click of their clawed feet on the stone outside. He began to count. Rolf and Horek, with Jommor between them and six or seven men behind, came running up. Banning stood in front of the door.

"We have Jommor with us," he shouted. "You in there, hold your fire unless you want him dead!"

"No," yelled Jommor. "Fire!"

Rolf hit him across the mouth. Banning leaned closer to the door.

"Do you hear? It's his life, as well as ours."

He thought he heard Tharanya's voice inside, giving them an order.

Thirty. *Now.*

He kicked the door in, crashing his boot-heel hard against the lock. His flesh shrank, expecting

the impact of explosive pellets. None came. A woman shrieked suddenly, and another. A half-dozen palace guards stood ranked in front of a group of servants and waiting women, armed but with their guns dropped. And now Keesh and Sohmsei had scuttled in through the window at their rear, and the guards were overwhelmed by an outbursting wave of screaming women and yelling men who wanted to avoid the Arraki.

Tharanya was not among them.

There was a door to an inner chamber beyond the milling clump of guards and servants. Banning fought his way toward it, but the Arraki were closer and they got there first, throwing the tall white panels wide. There was a room beyond with a broad white bed curtained in yellow silk, and thick rugs on the floor, and a woman's cushioned furniture. The walls were white with great inset panels done in a yellow brocade to match the hangings of the bed. One of the panels was still moving. It had been open, and now was almost shut.

No man could have reached that narrowing crack before it closed, but the Arraki were not men. By the time Banning had floundered into the room they had torn the panel open and vanished into the space that lay behind it. Banning heard them running, and then there was a scream of pure terror, compressed and made hollow by narrow walls.

Sohmsei came back, carrying Tharanya's limp body in his arms. He looked regretful. "I am sorry, Lord," he said. "We did not harm her. But this is a thing that happens often with your human women."

Banning smiled. "She'll come to," he said, and reached out his own arms. "Good work, Sohmsei. Where's Keesh?"

"Gone on to spy out the secret passage," said Sohmsei, laying Tharanya carefully in Banning's arms. "He will sense if any danger threatens."

Banning nodded. Tharanya lay against him. He could feel the warmth of her, the motion of her breathing. Her throat was white and strong and her red hair hung in a heavy mass below his arm, and her lashes were thick and dark on her cheeks. He didn't want to go anywhere. He just wanted to stand and hold her.

Rolf said grimly from behind him, "Come on, Kyle, we've still got work to do."

Keesh came back, his leathery flanks heaving. "Nothing," he said. "All is quiet there, Lord."

Rolf said, "We'll need the Ar-

raki, Kyle."

Banning started, and a chill shiver ran down his spine. This was the time now, the time he had dreaded.

VIII

The laboratory they were in was not such a one as Banning had ever seen before. The machines and instruments here were so masked and shielded that their purposes were unguessable, their complexities only to be imagined. This long, high white room had the quiet cleanness of a great hall of dynamos.

He could understand why only a man who had mastered the sciences of the stars could attain to high place in this far-reaching star empire.

Rolf was speaking to that man, harshly, rapidly. Jommor listened, his face set like stone. Horek was out checking the men as they rounded up stragglers, but the two Arraki were here, bunched and tense, their eyes roving alertly.

Tharanya had recovered. She sat in a chair, her face perfectly white and her eyes like hot sapphires as she looked at Banning. She looked at no one else.

Rolf finished, and Jommor said slowly, "So that's it. I might have known."

"No," said Tharanya, and then on a rising scale, "Oh, no! We'll not give your Valkar his memory back, so he can rend the Empire!"

"You haven't," Rolf pointed out grimly, "much choice."

Tharanya's flaring gaze never left Banning's face. She said to him bitterly, "You almost succeeded once, didn't you? You came here with whatever clues your father had left you, and you tricked me into letting you search the old archives, and you found the way to the Hammer and went away laughing—at us, at me."

Banning said, "Did I?"

She said, "You did, and with the oldest trick a man can use with a woman, and the cheapest."

Jommor said, "Tharanya—"

She did not look at him as she said, to Banning, "You were just a little too slow. The little that saved the Empire! We caught you, and Jommor erased your memory. We should have erased *you*."

"But you didn't, Banning said.

"No, we didn't. We hate killing —something a son of the Old Empire wouldn't understand. We were foolish enough to give you false memories and set you down on that fringe planet Earth and think you safely out of the way. *I* was foolish enough."

Rolf said sourly, "He was out of the way enough that it took me

long years of secret search on Earth to find him."

Tharanya looked slowly at the big dark man. "And now you have him, you want his memory too, and you'll have the Hammer in your grasp."

"Yes," said Rolf, and the word was like the snap of a wolf. "Listen, Jommor. You can restore his memory. And you'll do it. You'll do it because you don't want to see Tharanya die."

Jommor said, "I thought that would be it."

"Well?"

Jommor looked at Tharanya. Presently the line of his shoulders seemed to sag, and his head bent forward. "As you say — I haven't much choice."

Banning's heart pounded, and his flesh was cold. He said hoarsely, "How long will it take?" *Seconds, hours, centuries—how long does it take to change a man, to make him not?* Suppose this whole incredible dream was true and Neil Banning was only a name, a fiction, a walking lie? Would he remember, afterward? Would he mind, that he had not really ever been?

Jommor got up slowly. Without any expression of face or voice he answered, "An hour perhaps less."

Tharanya stared at him. It seemed that she could not believe what she heard. Then she cried out furiously, "No! I forbid you, Jommor—do you hear? I forbid you! No matter what they—"

Sohmsei laid one taloned hand gently on her shoulder, and she caught her breath, breaking off short with a gasp of loathing. And the Arraki said, "Lord, her mouth cries anger while her mind speaks hope. There is deception here, between these two."

Rolf made a short harsh sound between his teeth. "I thought Jommor had given in too easily." He looked from one to the other. "All right, out with it. It's no use to lie to an Arraki."

Tharanya moved away from Sohmsei, but she did not speak. Jommor shrugged, his face still showing nothing. Banning admired his control.

"The Arraki," said Jommor, "is doubtless a good servant, but he is overzealous." He looked at Banning. "You want your memory returned. I have agreed. I can't do more."

"An hour," Banning said. "Or perhaps less." He walked over to Tharanya. "What do you expect to happen in the next hour?"

Her eyes blazed at him, direct and unevasive. "I don't know what you're talking about. And please ask your—*creature* not to

touch me again."

"Someone is coming," Banning said. "Someone strong enough to help."

Sohmsei said quietly, "Her mind leapt. That is the truth her tongue did not speak."

Quite irrationally, but understandably, Banning became furious. He caught Tharanya by the shoulders.

"*Who* is coming?"

"Wait and see!"

Jommor said warningly, "Tharanya!" and Sohmsei chuckled. "They are thinking of a ship."

Rolf swore. "Of course, they'd send for others in the Empire council to confer about us. And unless the custom has changed, that means a Class-A heavy cruiser with a bloody admiral in charge." He turned on Jommor. "How long?"

"Five minutes, an hour — I can't tell you exactly."

"We'll still have you for hostages," Rolf said grimly.

Jommor nodded. "It should make an interesting situation."

"But not a good one," Banning said. "Rolf, we're getting out of here."

Rolf stared at him. "Not until Jommor returns your memory!"

"Jommor," said Banning decisively, "can do that in our ship, can't he? We're going!" He swung around. "Keesh, go tell Horek and the others to get ready to move. And bring back some men here, fast. There'll be equipment to carry Jommor! You designate all the apparatus you'll need. You won't forget anything—not if you care for your Empress."

The lines around Jommor's mouth got very deep, and for the first time there was a weakening of his iron control. He glanced first of all at Sohmsei, who was watching him with intent interest, and then at Rolf and Banning, such a glittering look of pure hatred that Banning almost flinched from it. Last of all he looked at Tharanya.

"Don't take her too," he said. "I beg of you."

"No harm will come to her," Banning told him, "that doesn't come to all of us.

To Tharanya he said, "I'm sorry. I didn't plan it this way."

Tharanya whispered, "I don't think that I would mind dying at all, if only I could watch you go first." She sounded as though she meant it.

A sudden doubt, a feeling of guilt, swept over Banning. He had let himself go with the rush of events, not thinking much about ethics. To an Earthman, star empires and empresses, Valkars and Hammers and intrigues that went

back ninety thousand years, seemed after all no more than words, and the stuff of dreams. It didn't much matter what you did about them.

But they had stopped being words. They were people, and realities. They were Tharanya and Jommor, and he himself was a living force — the Valkar, or the shadow of him. He was about to do a thing that could have undreamed-of consequences, affecting the lives of billions of people on worlds he had never even heard of.

He was appalled at the magnitude of his responsibility. And he knew now, at the last minute, that he could not go through with it.

"Rolf," he said. "I—"

The doors swung open and Keesh burst in. "A message, Lord —*Sunfire's* radar has seen another ship approaching, and Behrent says we must come aboard at once!"

Banning looked helplessly at Tharanya. He had no choice now. He needed her, to buy his own life and the lives of his men, to buy safe passage through the space patrols. Later on he might have time to think again of ethics.

"All right," he snapped. "Pass the word on to the captains, and get those men—"

"They are here, Lord."

"Good." He turned to Jommor. "Hurry up, and don't try to be clever. Sohmsei is watching."

He took off his cloak and put it around Tharanya's shoulders. "I'll take you to the ship now."

She was through looking at him now, through speaking. When he set his hand on her arm and led her forward, she walked beside him, straight and proud, but she paid him no more heed than if he had not been there at all—except that he could feel a quiver and vibration in her flesh when he touched it that almost burned him.

The lower halls of the palace and the grounds outside hummed with a tense and ordered haste. Men were returning to the cruiser in long files, at the double, the disarmed and helpless palace guards herded sullenly aside. They showed signs of fight when they saw Tharanya, in spite of the guns that menaced them, but Horek threw a heavy guard around her and Banning, and they went through with no trouble.

The fresh night air struck cold on Banning's cheeks. The dark sky showed him nothing, and yet he knew that out of it, swifter than starlight, danger was rushing toward him. He hurried Tharanya on. The trees and fountains fell behind, and they were out on the landing field with *Sunfire* before

them, paths of bright light streaming from her open ports. He wondered whether Rolf had started yet, whether he had all the equipment. He kept a tight grip on Tharanya, and wondered how close that other ship had come, how many minutes they had left.

Schrann was on duty in the airlock room, hurrying the men on, keeping them in order so as not to jam the narrow lock. When he saw Banning he said, "Captain would like to see you on the bridge, sir." His voice was taut, and he did not look happy. Banning hustled Tharanya roughly inside, not bothering to apologize. He shoved her without ceremony into an unoccupied cabin and locked the door, and set a guard on it. Then he hurried on to the bridge.

Behrent was striding up and down, looking grimmer than Banning had ever seen him. Orderlies were running in and out with messages. The technicians fidgeted at the control panels, and nobody was saying anything. Banning asked, "What's the situation?"

Behrent made a gesture with his two hands, the upper one dropping fast onto the lower and pinning it there. "Even now," he said, "we'd be going up right under her guns." He turned to glare out the port, at the men running far below. "What's holding them up?" he demanded. "What are they doing out there, playing games? By God, I'll clap hatches and leave 'em—"

A pink-faced young orderly, pop-eyed with nervous excitement, clattered up to Banning and panted, "Rolf just came aboard, sir, he says to tell you all secure, and he's seeing to the prisoner."

"Good," said Banning. He, too, looked out the port. "Go down and tell 'em to hurry it up. Take-off in two—"

Another orderly arrived with a message from the radar man. Behrent took it. A look of great weariness came over him, draining the color from his face.

"Don't bother," he said to the orderly. He handed the message to Banning. "If you look up at the sky now, you'll see her coming down."

"Let her come," said Banning, savagely.

Behrent looked at him. "But two minutes after they land, they'll know what we've been up to and they'll—"

"Two minutes," Banning said, "can be time enough. If we move fast."

He spoke what was in his mind and Behrent's face lit with a bleak light. "You're still the Valkar! It ought to work—but the patrols will all be alerted before we can

slip clear."

"We'll take the patrols," said Banning, "when we come to them."

Behrent started yelling into the annunciator system. "Gun crews to stations at light batteries! Snap to it or by God—"

You're still the Valkar! Banning thought that was ironic. He was still Neil Banning. He had postponed facing the ultimate issue of his own identity—but it was a postponement only.

Rolf shouldered into the bridge, his massive face grim. "So we're going to fight?"

"We're going to pin that cruiser, not fight it," Banning said. "At least, we're going to try. Jommor?"

"I locked him with Tharanya, under guard," said the big man. "His apparatus is also under guard separately."

Sohmsei, who had slipped in after Rolf, said to Banning, "It is the right machine, Lord. That I could sense from his mind."

"I hope we live long enough to have him use it," Banning said, between his teeth. He was looking up through the viewplates, at the starry sky.

Behrent too was looking up. There was, suddenly, a silence in the ship. Every man was at take-off station now. There was no sound but the deep, almost inaudible drone of the field building its power.

Up there against the stars, a dark spot came into being. It grew with appalling speed, ballooning out into a great black bulk that came rushing down as though the firmament itself were falling upon them. The *Sunfire* rocked a little from the wind of that coming, as the great grim shape of the heavy cruiser settled for landing, a hundred yards away.

Behrent yelled suddenly, "Take off!"

They went up fast, at the very moment the other cruiser was landing. Behrent watched the figures streaming across the big curving screen, as though he was seeing his future life and death on them. Banning looked down at the palace, the whole planet, sinking beneath them, and then heard Behrent's sharp command, "Fire!"

The palace, the landing-field, the big shark shape of the cruiser that had just landed, all lit to a bursting flare of light. The extreme tail of the cruiser down there was the focus of that blinding blaze, that leapt and died. Then their own upward rush took them away so fast that the whole scene below shrank and was no longer visible to Banning's eyes.

"That did it!" cried Rolf exultantly. "Can't have harmed the

personnel, but they won't be after us in a hurry!"

Now the *Sunfire* was running down the shadow-cone of the planet, and Banning became aware that from the radio-room the operator's voice was yelping, "Clear Lane 18—emergency, official! Clear Lane 18—Lane 18—"

They burst out of the shadow into the awesome blaze of Rigel's light. The enormous blue-white sun was at their backs as the cruiser broke out for clear space, the great lamps of the outer planets marching steadily as they changed position against the background of the starry heavens.

"Clear away, with Tharanya herself!" Rolf was saying. He clapped Banning's shoulder a mighty blow. "We'll show them that the old Empire has come alive!"

"The captain," murmured Sohmsei, "has no gladness in his mind."

Behrent had gone into the radio room and he was coming back, a mirthless grin on his lined face.

"I wouldn't," he said harshly, "do any celebrating yet. The word is already ahead of us and the outer patrols have got us on radar and are closing in ahead."

"Hell, smash right through them," Rolf swore. "They're only light cruisers."

"Wait," said Banning. "Our guns would outrange them, wouldn't they? A running barrage ahead of us — they couldn't answer at that range and would have to fall aside, wouldn't they?"

"All depends," Behrent said. But he made up his mind in a split-second. "It's worth trying. They don't know yet *why* we're wanted, or they might come in anyway. But not knowing—"

He didn't finish that. He went to the inter-com, demanded "Fire control!" and give his orders.

Now *Sunfire* was passing an icy outer planet at no more than a million miles. Their speed was such that the dirty white sphere seemed to roll back across the starry sky like a great bowling-ball.

The big guns began to go off. There was only the faintest of tremors as they salvoed, for their atomic shells were not hurled forth explosively but self-propeled, each by its own power-unit. But Banning saw the brilliant flares pinpricking the void ahead and to either side of them, a dance of fireflies against the mighty backdrop of stars. And as the great ship rushed on, the fire-flies, will-o'-the-wisps of death, kept pace with it, ahead of it and around it.

Radar reported. "Patrols drawing back! We're clear within two parsecs—"

Behrent spoke sharply into the microphone. "Full speed!"

"We've shaken them!" Rolf exclaimed. "I knew they wouldn't have the guts to come in!"

"—but heavy units, battle-cruisers and auxiliaries, have changed course to approach us from 114 degrees," droned the radar man.

There was a silence like death. Behrent turned, and his smile was agonized. "An Imperial task force got the flash. And they've got *us*. We can neither outrange them nor outrun them."

IX

Out here in the void, out here in the abyss so vast that it made a million million suns mere fretted starfires on the blackness, infinitely tiny bits of metal raced at incredible velocities, their space-tracks marked with minute flickerings as their field-drives discharged energy against the very warp of the continuum. Presently the many metal bits that were following would reach the one that fled ahead, and then death would leap and flare in the interstellar gloom, unless—

Banning said, "Tharanya's the only card that will take us through now."

Rolf nodded. "If we can convince them that we have her, Sohmsei, bring her and Jommor."

Banning said, "No, wait." He told the Arraki, "You and Keesh keep out of this, she's in terror of you and it'll only make things harder. I'll get them."

He went aft, to the corridor where a guard stood in front of a locked door. He motioned the guard to open up. Then, remembering the bitter hatred that had been in Tharanya's eyes, and in Jommor's too, Banning drew the heavy pistol from his belt.

Tharanya came out, with Jommor close behind her. She looked tired, and there were lines of strain around her mouth, but nothing of her pride had left her. She glanced at the weapon in Banning's hand, and then she smiled, very scornfully.

"Oh, yes," said Banning. "I'm careful. I'm very careful. You will both go ahead of me."

"Where?"

"You'll find out. Just go along."

You didn't talk to a sovereign that way. Banning rather enjoyed the astonished anger in her face. He admired the lithe stride of her long legs, the poise of her body, as she and Jommor went ahead of him to the bridge.

Jommor stepped first through the bridge-room door. Tharanya followed him, and on the very threshold she stumbled and fell back, coming heavily against Banning.

It was not an accident. Banning realized that a split-second too late, when her hands grabbed his forearms and she cried out, "His pistol, Jommor—take it and use it!"

It happened so quickly that those inside the bridge did not see at once what had occurred—and the Arraki, following Banning's orders, were out of sight. But Jommor's reflexes were set on a hair-trigger. He came whirling back at Banning, his face deadly with a sudden hope.

Banning braced his legs and lifted. He swung his arms up high, carrying Tharanya's light weight with them. He swung her into the air and threw her, literally and bodily at Jommor.

He was gambling that Jommor would not sidestep and let her fall. He was right. Jommor caught her, and then Banning's weapon covered them both unwaveringly.

"That was a good try," he said. "I admire your courage. But I would't do anything like that again."

They stared at him like two basilisks, bright with hatred, and he couldn't blame them. He wished he could. It would have made things easier.

The scuffle had brought the others around now, and Rolf came storming across the bridge, his face dark with anger.

"So you didn't want to frighten her with Sohmsei?" he said to Banning, who shook his head.

"It seems I'll have to." He called the Arraki, and then he said to Tharanya, "They won't harm you unless you force them to."

Behrent had not left the main screen. But he came to them now. His face was composed but his voice was a little thick as he said, "You'd better work fast. A full wing of battle-cruisers is almost within range of us. Radio-room reports a demand to stand by."

A flash passed across Tharanya's face. Banning's resolve hardened. "This is it, Tharanya," he said. "You're going into our radio room and you're going to order these cruisers to sheer off."

"I am not!"

Banning looked at Jommor. "You'd better persuade her, and fast. It means her life."

Jommor said, "You wouldn't kill her."

"Wouldn't I Maybe you're right," said Banning. "But what about the others here?"

"What about me?" said Rolf, between his teeth.

Jommor seemed to waver. Tharanya said, "You will not do it, Jommor." His face became stony with resistance.

The view-plates behind them

suddenly blazed with dazzling explosions of light, a raving brilliance that paled the stars. Across the whole wall of the heavens, behind *Sunfire,* great bursts of light flared and faded.

"They're ranging to bracket us," Behrent said. "We can fight back—but not for long, at these odds."

Banning said tightly, "Tharanya will stop them. I'll have radio-room get ready for her broadcast. Wait."

He raced off the bridge, into the radio-room. He was back in a moment, and he took Tharanya by the arm.

"Now, Tharanya, you're going to speak to those ships, and tell them that they'll cease firing or you'll perish with us."

Tharanya laughed. She looked almost happy. She said, "You won't perish—not this way. You'll have to surrender."

Banning said, "Jommor, you'd better talk to her, and quickly."

Again the viewplates lit to those awful flares, and this time they were closer, so close that they occluded all that part of the heavens.

Jommor said, "Tharanya—"

She exclaimed, "Don't you see, they know they're beaten, they know they can't force me to do it!"

Behrent had gone to the screens again but he came back now. He said puzzledly, "The cruisers just dropped back! They're still following, but they've fallen back and stopped firing."

"They wouldn't!" Tharanya cried. "You're lying—"

Banning heaved a sigh of relief. "That was too close. Anyway, it worked. They won't shell us, now they know their sovereign's aboard."

"But they don't know it yet, do they?" said Rolf.

Banning nodded. "I had radio-room cut this intercom mike right beside us into our broadcast wave. Every ship would have heard Tharanya's voice—and Jommor's."

Jommor uttered an exclamation in a voice thick with anger. Tharanya's eyes blazed baffled hatred, but she said nothing.

Banning motioned with his weapon. "We'll go back down. I wouldn't try any more clever tricks."

"I'll go with you," Rolf grunted.

The woman said nothing at all when they locked her in the cabin that had been Landolf's. But, in the next cabin, to which they took him, Jommor spoke up when they were about to leave him.

"We could still make a deal," he said to Banning. "Turn Tharanya loose in a life-skiff—and I'll restore your memory."

Banning laughed. He thought he had the measure of the man now.

"No, Jommor."

Jommor said steadily, "Rolf will tell you I've never broken faith."

"I can believe that. But I can also believe that you'd break faith this time—to keep us from getting the Hammer. Wouldn't you?"

Jommor made no answer to that, but the wavering of his gaze was answer enough.

Rolf told him, "You've got some time yet, Jommor. But soon, you'll do what we want. You'll be glad to."

"Will I?"

"Yes. Because of the place we are going to. Cygnus Cluster. We are going to it, and into it."

However little the Cluster might mean to Banning, it was perfectly evident that it meant much to Jommor. His powerful face became a shade paler.

"So that's where the Hammer is?"

"That's where. On a world in the most dangerous Cluster in the galaxy. *I* don't know what world it's on. And I don't know how to navigate the Cluster safely to get there. I'd run *Sunfire* to destruction, if I tried it. But someone does know."

Jommor's eyes swung to Banning. "The Valkar knows. Is that it?"

Rolf nodded. "Yes. The Valkar knows. Of course, he doesn't remember now, he'd crash us for sure in there—but when he remembers, we'll be safe enough. You. I. Tharanya."

Jommor said nothing for a moment, and then he whispered a curse so bitter that it shocked Banning. They locked the door.

"Let him sweat," said Rolf. He looked at Banning. "I think you'd better get some sleep, Kyle. You're likely to need it."

"Sleep?" cried Banning. "You expect me to sleep, with those cruisers hounding after us, with the Cluster ahead, with—"

"Nothing's going to happen for a while," Rolf pointed out brusquely. "Those ships will have checked with Rigel by now, they're certain we have Tharanya and they will merely follow us. And Cygnus Cluster is a long way off yet." He added meaningly, "And you've an ordeal ahead of you."

Again that icy breath of dread touched Banning. He knew that, deep down, he did not want Jommor to consent, did not want him tempering with the mind of Neil Banning.

"Come on," said Rolf, steering him toward his cabin. "I'll fix you a drink, to relax your nerves."

He did, and Banning drank it, thinking of other things—of Tharanya, and himself, and a vast threatening entity called the Cyg-

nus Cluster. He sat down on the bunk and talked to Rolf, and almost without knowing it he fell asleep.

He dreamed.

He was two men. He was himself, and he was the Valkar, a shadowy sinister figure with cruel eyes and outlandish dress, who bulked larger and larger until the familiar Banning was dwarfed and dwindled into a thing no bigger than a mouse. And the Valkar-self drove the Banning-self away, crying with tiny cries in a vast enveloping darkness. It was a frightening dream. He was glad when he woke from it.

Sohmsei was beside his bunk waiting, patient as a statue. In answer to Banning's question he said, "You have slept a long time, Lord. Very long. Rolf made it so, with a powder he put in your drink."

Banning said angrily, "So he drugged me, did he? He had no right—"

"It was good, Lord. You needed rest, for there will be no rest now, until all is over and done."

Something in the Arraki's tone made Banning shiver. "Sohmsei," he asked, "you have gifts that are denied to men. Is one of them a telling of the future?"

Sohmsei shook his head. "No more than you or Rolf, Lord, can I see beyond that wall. But sometimes, through a chink in the stones —" He broke off. "Even as men, we dream. It is probably no more than that."

"No, tell me. Tell me what you saw through the chink in the wall!"

"Lord, I saw the whole broad sky on fire."

Banning got up. "Do you know what it meant?"

"No. But doubtless we shall learn." Sohmsei crossed to the door, which he opened. "And now the Valkar is wanted on the bridge."

Banning went there, in no joyous frame of mind. Rolf and Behrent were both there, looking haggard, as though they had tried to sleep without the benefit of drugs and found it useless. They were standing at a forward viewplate. They turned their heads when Banning entered, and nodded, and when he joined them Rolf put one hand on his shoulder and pointed with the other.

Banning looked. Ahead of the ship, already clearly defined and growing imperceptibly larger almost as he watched, was a vast blazing cloud of stars, a stunning and unthinkable splendor of suns, scarlet, gold, and peacock-blue, emerald and diamond-white, flung like the robe of God across infinity. Patches of nebulosity glowed here

and there with softer radiance, and all along its side there was a darkness, a black cloud that absorbed all light, a greedy thing that seemed to feed on suns.

"I believe," said Rolf softly, "that on Earth it is known as the 'America' cluster, because of its shape. You see the resemblance to that continent's outline? And how odd the name seems, now."

"I wish I were back there," muttered Banning, and meant it.

Behrent had not taken his eyes from the glory ahead. To him it was not a wonder and a beauty, but a challenge — one that he knew he could not meet.

"A storm of stars," he said. "A howling gale of nebulae and rushing suns, and bits of worlds and moons, torn loose and smashed to fragments in the gravity tides. The wildest cluster in the galaxy —" He turned to them and said, "And the Hammer is in there?"

"Yes," said Rolf. He had iron in his voice now. "It's in there."

To Banning, it made the ancient Valkar weapon of mystery more awesome when he looked upon the terrifying place where it had been prepared and hidden. What could it be, this strangely-named Hammer that the galaxy had whispered of in dread for ninety thousand years?

His mind went back to what Sohmsei had said. *"Lord, I saw the whole broad sky on fire,"* and such nightmare visionings rose in him that he forced them down with an effort.

"It's in there," Rolf was saying grimly, "and we're going in after it. The Valkar will take us through."

Banning, feeling weak and hollow, turned to him and said, "I think we'd better have another talk with Jommor."

But even as he walked down the corridor beside Rolf, he knew it was useless. *He*—Neil Banning, or the Valkar, or both of them together—take a cruiser through that cosmic wilderness of suns? Impossible!

Jommor looked up at them when they entered his prison room. No particle of his hatred and his bitter anger had abated, and yet Banning sensed that something in him had changed. The iron was beginning to bend.

Rolf, without speaking, touched a stud and opened the viewplate in the wall, giving oblique vision of that storm of clustering suns ahead.

"Spare me your subtleties, Rolf," said Jommor, with an edge of contempt in his voice. "I have seen it."

"I'm not a subtle man," said Rolf. His face had never been more

rock-like and bleak. "I just drive straight ahead and do what I can. You know that. You know when I say we're going into that Cluster, we are. You can take that as a constant, in your equations."

Jommor's eyes brooded on Banning. "If I do the thing, do Tharanya and I get our freedom at once?"

Rolf jeered. "Oh, no, not at once. Those damned cruisers are still trailing us, and they'd snap us up. No—not till we're back out of the Cluster."

Jommor said suddenly, still looking at Banning, "He doesn't want it done. He's afraid."

Banning felt swift anger. "I'm not afraid," he lied. "And I would point out that you've little time, at the rate we're going."

Again, a silence. Jommor finally made a decisive gesture. "I can't let Tharanya go out like this. I'll do it." He added, and he spoke now to Rolf, "But don't feel too badly if it doesn't turn out quite as you expect."

Rolf's face darkened. "Listen, Jommor, it's known that you can play with men's minds like a child with toys. But don't be clever now! Unless the Valkar's memory comes back perfectly, unless his mind is sound and strong and with no flaw or weakness, you and Tharanya won't live long!"

"I promise," said Jommor deliberately, "that it shall be as you say. Yet—I know more of the mind than you. And I think you don't know what you are doing."

He stood up, he became suddenly the scientist, calm, precise, assured. He gave directions as to the apparatus he would need, the power flow he would require. Rolf listened, nodded, and went away. Banning remained. His heart had begun to pound. He did not like the veiled threat that had been in Jommor's words. He didn't like it at all.

The machine, when Rolf brought it, looked so simple. Thousands of years of psychological science, of men's lives and dreams and work on far star-worlds, had gone into this thing, and to Banning's ignorance it seemed only to be a cubical cabinet with a face of odd vernier dials, and a thing like a massive, swollen metal helmet. The helmet, Jommor suspended from the ceiling, and then motioned Banning to a chair. He sat down, not speaking, and Jommor lowered the great helmet over his skull.

It occurred to Banning suddenly that he must look very much like a woman in a terrestrial beauty parlor with an oversize hair-dryer on her head. He had an hysterical impulse to laugh. And then it hit

him.

Just *what* hit him, he could not be sure. Electronic waves of some sort, he supposed, in octaves still beyond the science of Earth. Whatever it was, it invaded his mind with a silent crash, an impact that sent his consciousness skidding and reeling over impossible abysses, around non-Euclidean curves. There was no pain. It was worse than pain. It was an agony of speed, distortion, flight, darkness, a whistling whirlpool that was all inside his skull but big enough to suck the universe into it. Round and round faster, faster, lurching, sliding, caught helpless in the torrent of memory set free, as one by one the barriers were burned away and the neurones gave up their locked knowledge.

Sohmsei's arms were around him, Sohmsei's face bent very large above him. Himself, very small and crying. He had cut his knee.

A woman. Tharanya? No, no, not Tharanya, this woman's hair was golden and her face was gentle. Mother. Long ago—

A broken wrist—but not broken under the apple tree in Greenville, that was one of the false memories that were collapsing and fading away beneath the impact of real remembrance. This broken wrist was in a ship that had just crashed on one of the worlds of Algol.

The ruins. Red Antares in the sky, himself half grown, half naked, racing the Arraki among the broken statues of Katuun, playing with the stars they had let fall.

Nights and days. Cold and heat, eating, sleeping, being sick and getting over it, being praised, being punished being taught. *You are the Valkar, remember that! And you will rule again.* Twenty years of memories. Twenty million details, words, looks, actions, thoughts.

Tharanya.

A girl Tharanya, younger than he, beautiful, sharp-tongued, hateful. Tharanya in the palace garden, not the Winter Palace but the great grim pile inside the capital, tearing the petals off a purple flower and taunting him because he was the Valkar and would never sit upon a throne.

Beautiful Tharanya. Tharanya in his arms, laughing while he teased her lips, not laughing as he taught her, from the wisdom of his male seniority, how a woman can shape a kiss. Tharanya, never guessing how much he hated her, how deep her spoiled-child taunts cut into his sensitive pride. Never guessing how intensely he meant to break her.

Tharanya, believing the words he had spoken and the things he had done, trusting his love—and that had been easy, because who would not love Tharanya and be her will-

ing slave?—letting him into the locked vault where the archives were kept, the lost, forgotten hidden key to the secrets of the Valkars.

Memories, sounds, colors, the feel of silk and woman's flesh, of leather and metal, of pages of imperishable plastic in an ancient, ancient book.

The ruined throne-room, open to the sky. The brooding lake, the stars, the night, and Father. Less of a man than a demigod, remote and very powerful, a beard and a hawk-like eye. Father beside him in the night, pointing to the stars.

Pointing to the Cygnus Cluster, saying, "My son, the Hammer of the Valkars—"

Memories, memories, memories, roaring, thundering, words and knowledge!

Words and actions, facts all neatly strung, and then a clear, clean break. Like the dropping of a curtain in Jommor's laboratory wing on that world of Rigel, one life ended and another began. The Valkar died, and Neil Banning was born.

Now, after ten long years, the Valkar was born again. But Neil Banning did not die, not the ten years when he had been real. Those memories belonged to both of them, share and share alike.

The Valkar-self and the Banning-self cried out together, as one man. "I remember! I remember —oh God, I know now what the Hammer is!"

X

He was awake.

And he knew now who he was. He was Kyle Valkar.

But he was also still Neil Banning! The memories of Banning, the real memories of ten years, were still there, far more strong and vivid than the Valkar memories of the twenty years before that.

You could not drop the "I" of the last ten years, in a moment. He *thought* of himself as Neil Banning, still.

"Kyle!" It was Rolf's hoarse anxious voice. "Kyle?"

Banning opened his eyes. The helmet had been removed. Rolf's massive face, drawn with anxiety was close to his. From a little distance, Jommor watched with an expressionless stare.

"Kyle, you remember—the Hammer?" Rolf was crying. "Where it is—how to reach it—*what* it is?"

Banning felt the horror sweep back over him. Yes, he remembered, only too terribly well. He remembered his father, the Valkar of years ago, teaching him from a great star-chart on the wall of the ruined palace.

"—the yellow sun that neighbors the triple-star just beyond the last rim of the Darkness—only to be approached from zenith or the drift will riddle you—"

Yes, he remembered that. And more. He wished he could forget the more, the secret of the Hammer's power that only he in the galaxy knew.

The part of him that was still Neil Banning recoiled in freezing terror from what the part of him that was Kyle Valkar remembered. No, no men could have planned such a thing, a thing to rend the very foundations of the galaxy, to destroy—

He would not think about it, he *must* not think about it now or his already overburdened mind would snap beneath the strain! It could not be true, anyway. Not even the Valkars of old, who had strode the galaxy like demigods, could have wielded or planned to wield such a power as that.

Rolf was shaking him by the shoulders. "Kyle come out of it! We're going to hit the Cluster, we've only minutes and it all depends on you—*do you remember?*"

Banning forced himself to speak, through stiff lips. "Yes—I remember—enough to get us through the Cluster—I think—"

Rolf lifted him bodily to his feet. "Then come on! You're needed on the bridge!"

Jommor

Banning stumbled along beside Rolf, like a man in a daze. But when they entered the bridge, the sight now mirrored by the forward port shocked him into an awareness of danger, and the imminent necessity for action.

During that interval when his mind was lost in the dark whirlpool of time, *Sunfire* had been speeding at top velocity toward the Cygnus Cluster, and now Banning saw that they were almost in it—had in fact already penetrated its outflung edges. It was no longer a splendid distant entity, self-contained and definite. It had grown monstrously until it filled the universe, above, below, and on either side. A million suns engulfed the ship, as a grain of dust is caught

up in the swarming of a million bees, and all the heavens were aburst with light.

Except in that quadrant where the Darkness lay. The Darkness, beyond whose last rim hung a triple star with a yellow sun beside it, and on the world of that yellow sun a Thing so terrible that—

No. No time for that now, no time to shiver and crumble in the grip of dread. Later, if you live. Later you can face the unthinkable.

But can you? And what will you do when you can no longer evade and postpone, when you must take the Hammer in your hand, and—

Behrent was looking at him. Rolf was looking at him, and so were the technicians, their faces bright and strange in the flooding glare, the raw star-blaze of the cluster.

Behrent said quietly, "The ship is yours."

Banning nodded. For a moment the Banning part of him flinched away in ignorance and terror, but the newly-awakened Valkar part looked out at the multitude of suns, and then inward at the ground-glass screen where the flight data was correlated. The man who sat at the control bank stared up at him, his forehead beaded with an icy sweat. Banning said, "Get up."

He sat down in the man's place, with the control keys under his hands. And memory flowed back, old skills and forgotten powers, and his fingers were alive and sentient on the bars, feeling the pulse and heartbeat of the ship.

He knew what to do. He was the Valkar. He was young again, hurling a speeding ship between the wild suns of Hercules, shooting the Orion Nebula, learning the hair-trigger responses and the cold mental calculation that would some day carry him in through Cygnus to—

No! Keep your mind off that. Fly the ship. Get through. You've got to now, dying is not enough. Dying might take care of the present, but not the future. The Valkars did this, and it's up to you.

Besides, there is Tharanya. You brought her. Her life, too, is your responsibility.

Fly the ship! Get through!

Sunfire fled, a tiny mote, into the furnace heart of the Cluster. Outside, beyond the fringing stars, the Imperial task force slowed its speed and hung motionless in space. On a hundred bridges, a hundred captains watched a pin-point fleck go off their radar screens, lost in the overwhelming roar of solar force.

Inside *Sunfire*, there was silence. A thousand men and one woman crouched inside an iron vault and waited, for life, for death, for annihilation.

Under the Banning's hands—the

Valkar's hands—the force-field that drove the cruiser ebbed and flowed, shifting focus constantly to compensate for the terrible drag of the stars that went reeling and spinning past the shuttered ports, monsters of green and red and golden fire. Silence, and the pounding throb of generators, and the tiny beating of a thousand human hearts, and *Sunfire* rode the gravity-tides that raced between the suns, as a leaf will ride a mill-race between great shattering rocks.

And the swarming star-field slipped gradually aside, and the Darkness, the black nebula that cuts deep into the Cluster's flank, was set sharp on edge before them.

The Valkar remembered. The coordinates, projected on three dimensional space, with the four-dimensional correction for the passage of ninety thousand years. Turning, twisting, going back, weaving ever deeper into the Cluster along a circuitous route, every complex component of which was indelible in his brain.

He heard Rolf say, "No *wonder* no one else ever got in here! Even to enter the Cluster is suicide, but to twist into it this far—"

The rim of the Darkness heeled and tilted, and the stars along it swam into a new alignment. And there was a triple star, a red giant with two components, one emerald green, the other a burning sapphire. And beyond the triple star there was a yellow sun.

"—only to be approached from zenith, or the drift will riddle you—"

A Type G sun, in the normal course of events, will have at least one Earth-type world. Such a world circled the yellow star, and Banning sent the ship plunging toward it, thinking that it was a cruel and ironic coincidence that this lost star deep in a wild cluster should remind him so much of Sol, and that the green planet swinging round it should be so much like Earth.

Down through the atmosphere, sinking like a stone. The planet rolling underneath, heaving up its western curve, showing the upthrust peaks of a mountain range.

The mountain range was new. But half around the world beyond it was a place of very old formation, as stable as anything can be in an unstable universe. The place was flat and bare, and in the center of it was a structure.

Banning set *Sunfire* down. He felt as old as time, and as tired. A mounting excitement ran through the ship, men's voices raised in the hysterical joy of having survived. Behrent, Rolf, the technicians, other men crowded around Banning. He got up, shaking his head, and pushed them off. Rolf started to cry out

some word of triumph, and Banning looked at him, and he fell silent.

"Get Jommor and Tharanya," Banning told him. "They have a right to see the end of this. They've come a long way to see it."

Banning turned and went alone down the corridor toward the airlock—alone except for the two Arraki, who were like his own twin shadows. He ordered the lock opened, and stepped out into the sweet untainted air of a world that had never been used by men.

Except once.

Banning began to walk across the barren plain. The sun was high in a sky of clear blue flecked with little clouds—*just such a sky*, he thought, *was over Greenville that day on Earth*. He shuddered, and the air seemed cold, and ahead of him the structure that had been raised millennia ago by men stood gaunt and mighty against the drifting clouds.

"Of course, by men," murmured Sohmsei, echoing Banning's thought, "What other creature could imagine such a glorious blasphemy?"

Banning turned. "I know now what it means, that glimpse you had of the whole broad sky on fire." His face was white, and the weight of worlds was on his shoulders—of worlds, of stars, of men and half men and everything that lived.

Sohmsei bent his head. "You will know what to do."

Rolf came out of the ship, with Jommor and Tharanya. They began to walk across the plain, the fresh breeze lifting their hair and tugging at their garments.

Banning's face contracted as though with some deep agony. He went on again, toward the Hammer.

It towered up, reared high on a platform as big as Manhattan Island—or at least it seemed so, to Banning's dazed eyes. It was shaped in some ways like a cannon, and in others like — no, not like anything else. Like itself alone. There had only been one Hammer. And it was the first, the beginning, the experiment carried out in the lost and secret place where there was ample material for the Hammer to crush, from whence it could reach out to—

A ladder led him up onto the platform, a ladder made of some wizard joining of ceramic and metal that would outlast the land it stood on. The platform, too, was built of a substance that had not weathered or corroded. A door of cerametal led inside, to a chamber underneath, and there were controls there, and mighty dynamos that drew power from the magnetic field of the planet itself.

Banning said harshly to Sohmsei, "Keep them out."

The Arraki looked at him—was it love and trust, or a loathing terror that showed in his eyes? Banning's own gaze was uncertain, his breath painful in his throat, his hands shaking like those of an old man with the palsy.

Now, now! Which was it to be, the Old Empire and the throne of the Valkars, the banner blazened with the sunburst? Or surrender to the mercy of Tharanya and Jommor, not only himself but Rolf and Behrent and all the others?

Banning put his hand on the breast of his tunic, and felt the symbol there, the sunburst bright with jewels. And suddenly he sprang forward in the silent room, toward the levers, the sealed imperishable mechanisms that held within them the coiled might of the Hammer.

He remembered. He remembered the tradition handed down from father to son, and the things that were written in the ancient books among the archives. Ambition had burned them into his mind, and greed had fixed them there with an etching of its own strong acid. He remembered, and his hands worked fast.

Presently he went out of the chamber and down the ladder, to where Jommor and Tharanya and Rolf were waiting with the two Arraki, five grim shapes at the end of the world.

Rolf started to ask a question, and Banning said, "Wait."

He looked up.

From the colossal pointing finger of the Hammer, there leapt up a long lightning-stroke of sullen crimson light. A giant stroke that darted toward the yellow sun in the heavens, that flared and glared—and then was gone.

There was nothing more.

Banning felt his bones turn to water. He felt the horror of a supremely impious action. He had done a thing no man had done before—and he was afraid.

Rolf turned toward him, his face wild and wondering. The others were staring puzzledly, disappointedly.

"Then — it doesn't work?" said Rolf. "The Hammer—it does nothing—"

Banning forced himself to speak. He did not look at Rolf, he was looking at the growing sunspot that had appeared on the yellow star, a blaze of greater brightness against the solar fires. His horror at himself was mounting.

"It works, Rolf. Oh, God, it works—"

"But what? What—"

"The Hammer," said Banning thickly, *"is a hammer to shatter*

stars."

They could not take that knowledge into their minds at once, it was too vast and awful. How could they, when his own mind had recoiled from it for all these terrible hours?

He had to make them believe. Life or death hung upon that now.

"A star," he said painfully, "nearly any star — is potentially unstable. Its core a furnace of nuclear reactions, from which hydrogen has been mostly burned away. Around that core a massive shell of much cooler matter, high in hydrogen content. The trapped, outward-pushing energy of the central furnace keeps the cooler shell from collapsing in upon it."

They listened, but their faces were blank, they could not understand and he *must* make them understand, or perish.

Banning cried, "The Hammer projects a tap-beam—a mere thread compared to stellar mass, but enough to let that pushing energy of the nuclear core drain out to the surface. And without that push of radiation to hold out the shell—"

Understanding, an awful understanding, was coming into Jommor's face. "The shell would collapse in upon the core," he whispered.

"Yes. Yes—and you know what the result is when that happens."

Jommor's lips moved stiffly. "The cooler shell collapsing into the super-hot core—it's the cause of a nova—"

"Nova?" That, at least Rolf could comprehend, and the knowledge struck a stunned look into his eyes. "The Hammer could make any star a *nova?"*

"Yes."

For a moment, the sheer terrifying audacity of the concept held Rolf's mind to the exclusion of all else.

"Good God, the Hammer of the Valkars—a hammer that could destroy a star and all its worlds—"

But Jommor had already gone beyond that reaction, to ultimate realities.

He looked at Banning. He said, "You used it on *this* star? And this star will become a nova?"

"Yes. The collapse must already have begun. We have a few hours —no more. We must be far from this system, by then."

Final understanding came to Rolf then. He stared at Banning as though he saw him for the first time. "Kyle—the Hammer—we can't take it, it's far too huge—then it perishes, when this planet perishes?"

"Yes, Rolf."

"You have destroyed—the Hammer?"

"Yes. When this world perishes,

in a few hours, the Hammer will perish with it."

He expected, from Rolf, a cry, an agonized reproach, a blow, death even—It was Rolf's life that he had destroyed, a life spent in the service of the Valkars, a life whose deepest reality had been the hope of someday attaining the Hammer that would put power again in the hands of the old dynasty. And that was all gone now, all the bitter years of toil and search and struggle—

Rolf's great shoulders sagged. His massive face seemed to sag too, to grow old. His voice was dull, when he said, "You had to do it, Kyle."

Banning's heart leaped. "Rolf, you understand?"

Rolf nodded slowly, heavily. "The old Valkars went too far. God, no wonder the galaxy revolted against the Old Empire! To kill a star — too terrible — too *wrong* — " He added haggardly, "But it's not easy, to give up a dream—"

Tharanya had watched with wide, wondering eyes, but now emotion flashed across her mobile face. She stepped forward and grasped Banning's arm.

Jommor said unsteadily, "Kyle Valkar would not have given up that dream. But you are another man too, now—an Earthman. It was all I had to count on when I restored your mind."

In that timeless moment, so brief but seeming so long, the light about them darkened. Banning looked up.

The aspect of the yellow sun had become subtly terrifying. It was dimming slightly—a shade coming across it like the shadow that preludes the coming of storm. The faces of the others stood out white in the hazing gloom. Sohmsei and Keesh waited grotesque and calm. Stark and brutal against the heavens, the Hammer loomed over them.

"We've little time," Banning forced himself to say. "The margin may be less than calculated—we'd better take off."

They started to move toward *Sunfire*. And of a sudden, fear was on Banning—fear such as no man had ever felt before. A star had been given its death-blow, and in its dying throes this solid planet beneath them would be a butterfly in a furnace. They were running, by the time they reached the ship.

He took the control-keys, he took the cruiser off with a nightmare rush. It steadied his shaking hands, that he must use them now —that upon him depended their lives once more. He drove the ship out and out, and behind them the yellow sun still dimmed, and dark-

ened, and—

"Don't look!" cried Jommor. "Dim the viewplates—dim them —dim them—"

A giant wave of raving energy caught the force-field drive, and the ship went out of control. Banning, groping frantically for the keys, glimpsed the starry heavens gyrating madly across the now-dimmed viewplates. And as the cruiser whirled, there came into view the yellow sun they had left.

It was exploding outward, a cosmic bloom of fire unfolding its awful petals at unthinkable speed. It paled the fierce brilliance of the Cluster, and the Darkness flared up madly with reflected glory, and the whole galaxy seemed to recoil shuddering from the intolerable splendor of the bursting star.

The star that he had slain—

That dread vision whirled away as *Sunfire* yawed and plunged and trembled, and was tossed like a ship upon giant waves of force.

The triplet of red and green and blue suns loomed up terrifyingly close as the cruiser was hurled toward them. Banning smashed the keys, drove the ship up, away, was sucked back and fought free again, and again—

It seemed to him that he fought the keys forever, with the symbols on the screen gone crazy and useless, with the power of a riven star seeming to reach out to overtake and destroy the man who had tortured it to this explosion, as it had already destroyed its planet, and the Hammer.

It was only slowly, slowly, that Banning's mind could take in anything but the keys beneath his hands, could realize that the wildest waves were past, that the *Sunfire* was surging more steadily away from that awesome blaze across the firmament behind them.

Rolf spoke to him, and he did not hear the words. Rolf grasped his shoulder, shouted in his ear, and still he would not listen. A woman spoke to him, and to her too he was deaf and blind.

But a voice came through to Banning, at last—a voice from an old, old time, only whispering, but reaching him when those others could not.

"It is done, Lord. And the ship is safe."

Banning turned slowly, and saw the wise and loving eyes of Sohmsei. He looked at the viewplates. They were speeding out through the fringes of the Cluster, and wide leads of clear space lay ahead.

Behrent hovered worriedly beside him, wanting to take over. He understood then that they feared him a little mad.

He got up, and Behrent took the keys. Banning looked around at the

white faces that met his, and then in the viewplates he saw the thing in the sky behind them, falling far behind now, the stupendous death-fire back on the rim of the Darkness—

"Kyle," said Rolf, hoarsely. "Kyle, listen—"

He would not listen. He had slain a star, and the burden of a cosmic guilt was on him, and he could not bear their faces or their words. He went past them, he stumbled down the corridor to his cabin, he shut the port so that he could not see the thing back there that he had done.

He sat, not thinking, not trying to think. The cruiser sped on. It seemed a long time before the door opened, and Tharanya came in.

"Kyle."

"Kyle!"

He looked up, and her face was white and strange, all hatred, all passion, gone. He remembered something he must say to her.

"Tharanya, Rolf, and Horek, and all the others—"

"Yes, Kyle?"

"They followed me into this. And I failed them, I destroyed their only hope."

"They would not have had it otherwise! You did it, for all the galaxy."

"I know—but I was their leader. I'll make you a proposal. You and Jommor to be turned over to your fleet, out there. I'll go with you. But — a free pardon for all the others."

"It is done, Kyle. A free pardon for them."

"Let Rolf hear you say that, Tharanya."

She went out. When she came back, Rolf and Jommor were with her, and Sohmsei. Rolf looked swiftly at Banning, and then sighed.

"So he's himself again—well, it's small wonder—"

Tharanya spoke to him, and Rolf's brows drew together in anger.

"A pardon for us, and the Valkar to go to death? No!"

Sohmsei whispered, "Death is not in her mind, for the Valkar."

"No," said Tharanya. "Oh, no!"

Banning looked up. He saw her face clearly for the first time, and he saw in it what seemed to him incredible.

"Can the years of before, the man of before, come back, Tharanya?"

She had tears in her eyes but her voice was steady. "Not the man of before, not Kyle Valkar only. I could not love him again, but—"

Jommor sighed. "Well." He turned, his face sad, and then turned back and held out his hand. "I hated the Valkar. But I made him into a different man. I think I

could get along with that man."

Rolf stared at them, at Banning and Tharanya, in amazement. "But I thought at the worst you'd send him back to Earth—"

"Let Earth alone," she said. "Someday, but not for a long time, we of the Empire will go there in open friendship. But not now. And not the Valkar. He's a starman—you all are. He—you—are welcome to come home to the Empire, if you will. Not the Old Empire, or the New, but—the Empire."

"By God!" exclaimed Rolf. "Then a Valkar may yet sit upon the throne?"

The old imperious pride flashed up in Tharanya's eyes. "Not on the throne, no!" But her face was troubled as she looked at Banning.

He took her hand. They were not lovers, they were strangers, for he was not the man she had once loved. But maybe the new man, Banning-Valkar, could win back what once the Valkar had won and thrown away.

Far away and long ago seemed Earth, and his years on Earth! Those years had molded him, and he thought not for the worse. But these shining spaces between the stars, these were his birthplace, these were his future, these were his home.

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TERWILLIGER AND THE WAR MACHINE

By Evan Hunter

The Martians were suspicious when Earth offered to exchange their Death Ray machine for the return of a war prisoner, so they decided to investigate and see if they could discover why Earth placed such a high value on PFC Terwilliger Appleby, 714 56 32.

Illustrated by H. W. McCauley

RUMPELSTIL-MEYER, the Martian Overlord, clucked his tongue, nodded his hairy heads, and placed three of his arms on the desk top.

"I don't understand," he said.

Bois de Bologne-Sundwich allowed a resigned look to cross one of his faces. "These Earthmen are difficult."

"Difficult, yes. That is understandable. Insane, true. Even that is fathomable. But this last offer, this is preposterous!"

"It must be a trick," Bois de Bologne said.

"I've considered that. If so, it's a fairly expensive one, and I can't believe that even the Earthmen would . . . "

"The Earthmen have done many strange things."

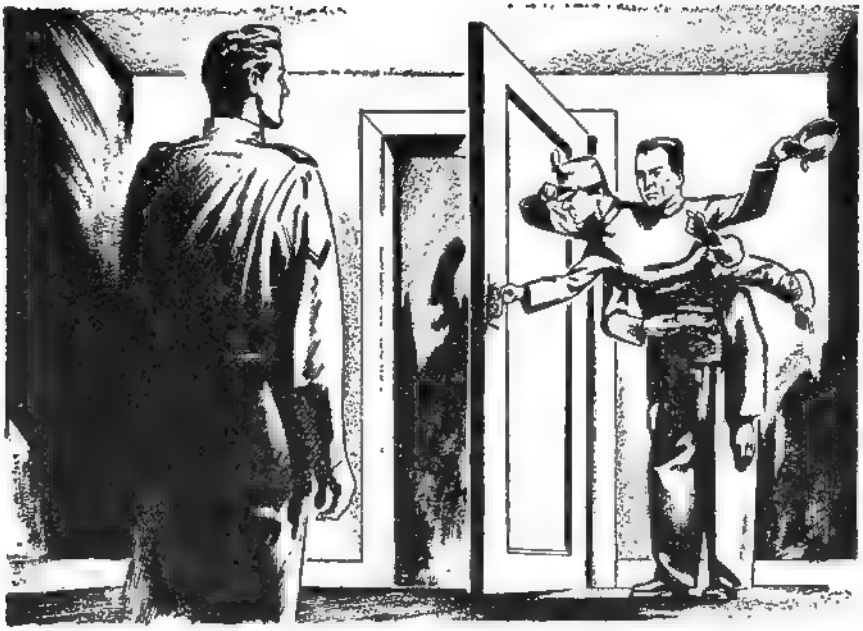
"Yes," Rumpelstil paused, stroked one chin, and screwed up the eyebrows on his other head. "What's this fellow's name? The one they want?"

"Terwilliger. Terwilliger Appleby."

"A curious name," Rumpelstil-Meyer said.

Bois de Bologne shrugged his shoulders. "Earthmen, you know."

"And they are willing to give us a ten billion dollar machine for this man?"



"That is what the message read."

"Who delivered the message?"

"One of their infantrymen."

"Did you question him?"

"Yes, sir."

"And?"

"The results were negative, sir."

"Why? Do you mean to tell me . . . "

"The messenger was deaf, sir."

Rumpelstil shook both heads. "Clever, these damned Earthmen. Sometimes I wish we'd never bothered with them."

"Shall I read you the message again?"

"Please."

Bois de Bologne cleared his throat. He struck a classic pose, held the message before him, and began. "Hail, honorable foe. It has been brought to the attention of our High Command that Private First Class, Terwilliger Appleby, 714 56 32, was captured by your forces in the last engagement at Xanthe. Our offer follows: for the safe return of this man, we will exchange our ten billion dollar Death Ray machine. You will remember this devastating weapon as the same one which annihilated twelve of your men in the battle of Amazonis Bulge. We shall await your

reply. Respectfully."

"Who signed it?"

"The President."

"Of *Earth?*"

"No, sir. Of Texas."

"This Appleby is a Texan?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mmmm. Were twelve men actually annihilated at Amazonis?"

"It was more like eleven, sir."

"Damned exaggerators. Well, even so."

"If I may suggest something, sir."

"Yes?"

"I say give them the puny bastard. It sounds like a good deal."

Terwilliger Appleby sat hunched in the corner of his cell. He stared through the bars and out across the red sands. He sighed heavily, ran long, skinny fingers through his lank hair, and then sighed again. This was not why he had joined the Army.

The posters had said: Travel, Education, Security.

He had traveled, true. He had traveled to the spaceport in White Sands, had a two-hour layover at the space station, and a half-hour delay in transit at the Lunar Base. He had been rushed directly to Xanthe then, and now here he was.

Education? Oh yes. The Army had been good to him. When they'd discovered what he could do, they'd been very kind. They'd trained him for six months, and then given him the entire responsibility. And then he'd been rushed directly to Xanthe, and now here he was.

Security? He was secure, by God. After Xanthe.

The situation was probably similar to the one in the War of 1812, when the United States dispatched General Hull into Canada with an army of 2,000. They fell back and surrendered at Detroit to a smaller force under General Brock on August 16th. Brock, of course, was killed in October, in the Battle of Queenston Heights near Niagara Falls, but his troops dispersed an invading American army led by General Van Rensselaer.

On the sea, meanwhile, the *Constitution* captured the frigate *Guerriere* on August 19th . . . but that did not apply here.

Terwilliger stood and stretched his full five foot six inches. Lord, he was tired. He walked from the window to the cell door, and back to the window again. When he turned toward the door once more, a two-headed creature was standing there with a large ring of keys in one of his hands.

"Did I startle you?" the Martian asked.

"No, not at all. I'm used to it by now."

"The boss wants to see you."

"Who?"

"Rumpelstil-Meyer."

"What about?"

The Martian shrugged his shoulders. "Search me. I'm just in charge of the keys." He unlocked the door, clanged it open, and said, "Follow me."

He started down the long stone corridor ahead of Terwilliger, turning one head to keep an eye on him. At the end of the corridor, he turned his other head, opened a door with one arm, bowed at the waist with another, took off his hats with a third and fourth, indicated the open door with a fifth, and rattled his key ring with a sixth.

"In there," he said.

"Thank you."

The Martian held out a seventh arm, the palm flat and up, in a gesture Terwilliger recognized immediately. He fished into the pocket of his breeches, dug out a quarter and gave it to the Martian.

Then he walked into the big room, and the Martian closed the door behind him.

There were two other Martians in the room. Terwilliger looked from one head to the other, waiting for some sign.

"Sirs?" he asked.

"Private Appleby?"

"Private First Class Terwilliger Appleby, 714 56 32, sir."

"Your outfit?"

"Name, rank, and serial number, sir. As required under Covenant 31A-7691Z, Clause XX-0192-Z, Paragraph 67, lines 17 to 23 inclusive, of the Articles of Interplanetary War, agreed to and executed on the 30th day of May, in the year of our Lord, 2783. Signed for Mars by General Oscar Wilde-Berry, witnessed by Lt. General Whaton-Irth."

Rumpelstil-Meyer coughed discreetly. "I see," he said.

Bois de Bologne picked up a yellow form from the desk. "Private Terwilliger, is it true that you were captured at Xanthe?"

"Yes, sir."

"At exactly 0801, on August 12th?"

"No, sir. It was 0759."

"Impossible," Rumpelstil-Meyer said. "The attack did not start until 0800."

Terwilliger smiled. "Perhaps your chron was wrong, sir. The attack started at 0757. Four hundred rockets, classification—Martian, of course—Zebra Zebra Mike opened the attack. They were followed by seventy-two mortars, Able Oboe Nan class. That was at 0757."

Rumpelstil-Meyer c o u g h e d again, not as discreetly this time. "I see," he said.

"Nonetheless," Bois de Bologne continued, "are you aware of the

preposterous offer your government has made for your safe return?"

"No, sir."

"They are willing to exchange their Death Ray machine for you."

"Are they? Isn't that nice of them?"

"Why?" Rumpelstil-Meyer asked.

Terwilliger smiled again. "I guess they like me, sir."

"No ones likes anyone ten million dollars worth."

Terwilliger shrugged.

"Are you someone important?" Bois de Bologne asked.

"Private First Class Terwilliger Appleby, 714 56 32."

"We know," Rumpelstil-Meyer said.

"Are you an officer in disguise?" Bois de Bologne put in.

"No, sir."

"A visiting official?"

"No, sir."

"A scientist?"

"Heavens no, sir."

"What then?"

"Private First Class Ter . . . "

"If you say that once more," Rumpelstil-Meyer warned.

"Sorry."

"You can't tell me," Rumpelstil-Meyer went on, "that Earth would give ten billion dollars for a Private. No one is that crazy. A private is the lowest form of animal life."

"A buck private perhaps," Terwilliger corrected. "You're forgetting I'm a Private First Class."

"I'll never forget that as long as I live," Rumpelstil-Meyer said.

"He's important," Bois de Bologne said. "You can count on that."

Terwilliger almost blushed. "Why, thank you, sir."

"Confound it," Rumpelstil-Meyer shouted. "I haven't run across anything like this since the Scrimmage of Cydonia!"

"June 9, 2842. Earth was led by General Mark van der Still. A brilliant defeat. For Earth, unfortunately."

"What?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Oh, have him taken back to his cell!"

"Yes, sir. At once, sir."

Lt. Mark van der Still looked up from his desk at the supply depot. Papers, papers, always papers.

"Caputo!" he screamed.

Corporal Caputo rushed into the lieutenant's office, snapping a smart salute at him. "Yes, sir!"

"How many damn cans of Spam were sent to the troops at Diacria?"

"Well, sir . . . "

"Don't 'well, sir' me, Caputo. The adjustant wants to know,

and we've got to tell him."

"That's just it, sir. I don't know."

"You don't know? *You don't know?*"

"Appleby . . . "

"Damn Appleby, and damn those Martians who caught him. What was he doing near the front anyway?"

"Counting, I believe, sir."

The lieutenant shook his head. "What will we tell the adjutant, Caputo?"

"Well, sir, I think . . . "

"Corporals aren't paid to think, Caputo. Give me an answer. Never mind the damned thinking."

"Tell them we've already put in an application for four hundred clerks, sir. That'll bold 'em."

"And Appleby?"

"It might be best not to mention him, sir. I imagine they're rather touchy about that right now."

"A lousy Private First Class," Lt. van der Still mumbled.

"Sir?"

"Nothing, Caputo. Nothing at all."

"Nothing at all?" Captain Struthers bellowed. "What the hell are you talking about, Sergeant?"

"Just that, sir. There ain't no more."

"No more shells? But that's absurd. I've never heard of a company running out of mortars. Isn't someone supposed to count these damned things? Isn't someone supposed to make sure we don't run out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, who?"

"Appleby, sir."

"Who the hell is Appleby?"

"Who the hell is Appleby?" Major Alexander Woot shouted.

"He . . . he . . . "

"He, he, he, what? Get it out, man."

"The underwear, sir. I mean, that was his department, more or less."

"What do you mean, more or less?"

"He sort of kept check, sir."

"Kept check on what?"

"The underwear, sir. The long johns."

"You're trying to say, I imagine, that this Appleby fellow is responsible for the fact that half my company is going around with bare behinds, is that it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, bring him to me. We'll get to the bottom of this at once."

"I can't, sir."

"Why not?"

"He's been captured, sir."

"Captured? Good Christ!"

"Captured? Good Christ!" Colonel Evelyn Wauglerby roared.

"Yes, sir, and there ain't a drop left."

Colonel Waughlerby wet his lips and narrowed his eyes. "I'll tell you something, Sergeant, and I'll tell you once and only once. Are you listening?"

"Yes, sir."

"There are only two important things in the Army. For the enlisted man, it's his rifle. For the officer, it's the Officers' Club. Do you follow?"

"I follow, sir."

"All right, Sergeant. There's a dance at the Club tonight. There'll be a bunch of liberated Martian wenches there. They've all got two heads, Sergeant, and eight arms . . . eight loving arms, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir. I know, sir."

"Good. I'm glad you understand, Sergeant. Now, unless you want to wake up and find yourself a Corporal in the morning, you'd better get me that damned scotch I want, and you'd better get it damned fast."

"But there ain't none, Colonel. Appleby . . . "

If you persist in this damn nonsense, I'll break you to a Private, Sergeant. Do you expect me to believe that one man, this damned Appleby, was in charge of the whiskey allotments for the entire Terran Army. Really, Sergeant."

"He was, sir."

"Sergeant!"

"Honest, sir. I swear. And he's been captured."

"Then get his figures. Find out where he kept his records."

"That's just it, sir."

"What's just it?"

"There ain't no records, sir."

"There ain't no records?" General Amos Gaffney thundered. "Then how in hell am I supposed to know where all my troops are? How do I know who's where and what he's doing?"

"Appleby knows, sir."

"Appleby, Appleby. Well, there ain't no Appleby any more. He's with the damned Martians. Corporal, we've got to do something."

"We are now negotiating for his safe return, sir."

"Negotiating, my backside!"

"Yes, sir."

"Those Martians'll stall around for another year, and it'll take us at least *six* years to replace Appleby. You know how many clerks we'll need, Corporal? You got any idea?"

"No, sir."

"Neither have I. A lot, you can bet. A whole lot. I'll tell you something, Corporal. Strictly as man to

man, forgetting my stars and your stripes for a minute."

"Yes, sir."

"If we don't get Appleby back soon, this damned war is going to be shot right up its backside."

"Right up," the Corporal agreed.

"Two and two," Rumpelstil-Meyer said.

"Four," Terwilliger answered.

"Eight and eight."

"Sixteen."

"Ninety-seven and thirty-four."

"One thirty one."

"1,652 and 3,401."

"5,053."

"3,747,301 and 8,931,205."

"12,678,506," Terwilliger answered.

"Phenomenal."

"Fantastic."

"The development of the torpedo boat. Where, when?"

"Earth, England, 1877."

"First appearance of the gas-driven tractor?"

"1910."

"The area of Turkey?"

"294,500 square miles."

"Cowper?"

"William," Terwilliger said. "British poet, 1731-1800."

"Fourier?" Bois de Bologne asked.

"Francois Marie Charles. French socialist, writer and reformer. 1772-1837. Also Jean Baptiste Joseph, French mathematician and physicist. 1768-1830."

"Gurian Zor?"

"Saturnian space port town. Established 2533. Population 15,671. Elevation . . . "

"Preposterous," Bois de Bologne-Sundwich said.

"Unimaginable," R u m p e l s til-Meyer said.

"Are we agreed?"

"We are agreed. Let's formulate a reply at once." He turned one of his heads to Terwilliger. "What's your outfit, Appleby?"

"Name, rank, and serial number, sir."

"Of course, sorry."

"Should we send this to Texas? Or directly to Earth?"

"Earth," Bois de Bologne said.

"Fine."

The President of Earth looked at the message.

"Hmmm," he said.

The Secretary of State nodded his head gravely.

"This, ah, doesn't look too good," the President said.

"Not at all."

"Shall I read it aloud?"

"If you like."

The President looked at the message. "Ah, perhaps you had best read it to me. I seem to have misplaced my glasses."

"Certainly." The Secretary of

State picked the message gingerly from the desk. He cleared his throat and looked at the custodian who was busily dusting the fireplace. He stared at the message.

"Curious thing," he said.

"What's that?" the President asked.

"I seem to have misplaced *my* glasses, too. I wonder if this gentleman would be so kind?"

The custodian put down his feather duster. "Yah," he said.

The Secretary of State handed him the message, and the custodian cleared his throat and began:

"Gendlemen: Ve are in reziept of your lazt mezzage. Id is clear dot zome pointz need clarification. Ein. I mean, vun: under de exzisting Artigles of Inderplanetary Var, ve are allowed to pud a prizoner to votever uses ve see fit. On de udder hand, ve cannot claim a prizoner as our own, dot is, ve cannot Martianize him. Two: we are now pudding Tervilliger to his best uses. On de udder hand, ve vould like him for our own. Derefore, a counter-offer."

"What's the counter-offer?" the President asked.

"Three-tousand rogget ships, togedder with full crews for zem. Eighteen hundred jed tangs, togedder with full crews for zem. You can keep de Death Ray machine. Ve don't vant it. Ve vant Terwilliger Appleby."

The President sneezed.

"*Gesundheit,*" the custodian said.

The President smiled and said, "I didn't know you were German, my good man. Does the message say anything else?"

"No, zir."

"Hmmm," the President said.

"Yes," the Secretary agreed.

The custodian put the message on the desk, and went back to dusting the fireplace.

"Do you realize how many men we've released for action in the past six months?" Rumpelstil-Meyer asked.

"No, sir. How many?"

"Millions. Why this Terwilliger Appleby is the best thing that ever happended to Mars."

"Easily."

"He's done away with the necessity for any sort of an accounting system. He's abolished the Army clerk. Why, in six months, we've shifted every tiresome detail of requisition and supply to his shoulders. The man is a veritable-storehouse of knowledge. Under the Articles, he could not refuse the job, thank Deimos."

"It'd be hell if we ever had to give him back," Bois de Bologne stated.

"No chance of that. What was Earth's latest offer?"

"The Lunar Base, together with a full crew."

"And our counter-offer?"

"The third, fourth, and fifth regiments. All crack troopers."

"In the meantime, we've still got him."

"And the Earth army is beginning to collapse," Bois de Bologne chuckled.

"Don't laugh, my friend. The same thing would happen to us if we ever lost Terwilliger."

"Don't you worry about that. He's a very happy man. Especially since we provided him with a wench."

"Martian?"

"Of course."

"Good stock?"

"The best, Officers' Club."

Rumpelstil-Meyer nodded sagely. "He's happy."

The turnkey peered through the bars on the cell door.

"Hey, you two," he said. "Time for dinner."

There was no answer.

"Terwilliger?"" he asked the darkness.

There was still no answer.

"Are you two at it again?" he asked. Then, in desperation, he called the Martian wench's name. "Aviondelagonspurden?"

He peered down the corridor with one head, looked into the cell with the other. Quickly, he opened the cell door.

There was a big hole in the outside wall. A very big hole. A hole large enough for a regiment to crawl through. The Martian sands gleamed redly outside, stretching away to a barren horizon.

"Oh, my God," the turnkey said. "He's gone. Terwilliger is gone."

He ran down the corridor, his eight arms flapping wildly.

"Guard!"

"Gone? No! Oh, *no*, No, no, no, no."

"Yes."

"No."

"He's gone."

"Where? Back to his own lines? That'll mean the end of us, Bois."

"I know, Rump."

"Did he take the wench with him?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my God."

"What'll we do?"

"What'll we *do?* It'll take us six years to reorganize. At least. We've got to find him, Bois."

Bois de Bologne-Sundwich sighed heavily. "I'm afraid we're dead, Rump."

It was a year before both armies decided the cause was a hopeless one. There was no way of knowing what was what or who was where or even who was who. The armies

sat on the red sands, and they waited, and finally they grew tired of waiting, and they headed for home.

Desertion was not an easy thing to stop. You can't stop a soldier from going home when you don't know where he is, or where he's supposed to be.

The Earth men withdrew to their rockets, and the rockets blazed across the skies, trailing dead ash behind them. The Martains walked, or rode, or used rocket sleds, and the sands were gradually cleared, leaving only the rusted machinery of a forgotten cause.

The formal declaration of peace came some three years later, and by that time, everyone had forgotten Terwilliger Appleby.

They stared up at the twin moons, and she stroked his face with two hands, held him close with another two, prepared supper with the remaining four.

"Are you happy?" she asked.

"Very, very happy," he said.

"And you're not sorry?"

"I'll never be sorry."

"Even with your new responsibilities?"

"The children? No responsibility at all."

"There are quite a few," she said, shaking both her heads.

Terwilliger shrugged. "Damion, born August 9th, 2861. Alicia, June 18th, 2862. Roger, April 29th, 2863. Arogiojel, February 3rd, 2864. Cynthia, December 16th..."

He could have gone for half the Martian night . . . but supper was ready.

THE END

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SYMPTOMATICUS MEDICUS

By Alan E. Nourse

The plague struck Philadelphia in 1954 *leaving the physicians and neophytes at a loss, for the old spells and incantations were losing their power to stem the tide of sickness and death.*

Illustrated by H. W. McCauley

THE year was 1954. That it was to be a highly significant year was not surprising, for on the Kalendar of Gonwal it had been marked up in illuminated gold for many generations, and thus it was known that the thirteen months of that year were pre-ordained for many curious and wonderful happenings. Many were to remember it as the year when television made its first appearance throughout the world; to others it was significant that this was the year when that first rocketship, with its tiny crew of brave adventurers, made its ill-fated attempt to reach the moon. And still others that year were

thrilled by the curious and frightening findings in the archeological diggings in the depths of the Atlantic.

But above and beyond all else, that year 1954 was to be remembered throughout the world of men as the year of the Great Philadelphia Plague, the fearful rose-spot scourge that had come like the night wind in the black treetops, slinking silently into the streets and alleyways of the aged city, flowing in the black depths of the Schuylkill and the Delaware, breathing death in its wake. It was first recognized at St. Ignatius' Infirmary, but by the time its true nature was realized it had moved in upon the city defying the most powerful forces of Sacred Medicine to check its incredible onslaught.

And from the plague-ridden city, Professor Henry Ireland, Physician-Sacerdos Exemplary of the City of Philadelphia, had flown to Denver-town to attend the quadrennial Congress of Aesculapiads, bringing with him the proposal which was to shake the world of Sacred Medicine for decades to come.

Professor Henry Ireland smoothed the folds of his richly brocaded black gown as he waited, tensely, for the murmuring in the great hall to subside. With trembling fingers he stroked the gold medallion which hung from his neck, the gleaming Cross-and-Serpent that was his badge of office, a symbol of the dark and mysterious powers of a Physician-Sacerdos. His face was pale; there were haggard lines of fatigue and pain about his mouth, but in his eye was a new gleam of hope. The battle against the plague which had engulfed his city had drained his strength and all but killed his hope, but now as he sat waiting to address the assembly of Physicians here, it seemed almost possible that they might hear him, even in the face of Brunnhauser's brutal opposition.

He leaned forward a moment, the better to drink in the spark of excitement that rippled through the great hall. Up on the speaker's platform Professor Brunnhauser was banging ineffectually for order, his fat, sallow face dark with anger. Perhaps even Brunnhauser had risen above his glutted self-satisfaction long enough to see the handwriting on the wall during the previous session, for he had been abruptly and soundly defeated when he had tried to force through an antiquated ruling which would have refused Professor Ireland recognition on the floor. The battle against the ruling had been short, and the excited murmur which now rippled up and down the hall, the flushed, eager eyes

turning in his direction now, might possibly mean that Brunnhauser's heavy-handed rule of Sacred Medicine was weakening—

And then, with his heart in his throat, he heard the Chairman's voice booming out, "The Chair recognizes Professor Ireland of Philadelphia!"

He rose, slowly, and stood straight as a ramrod, a figure of dignity and strength. He pinned the microphone to his stiff white collar, and stared out at the Assembly, and when he began to speak his words carried the power of deep inner conviction. "It is a tremendous honor," he said, "to address this assembly of Sacred Medicine, particularly on this occasion, for as you know, we are gathered here to reinforce once again the fearful Pact between the forces of Good and the Prince of Evil which gives us our poor power to fight disease and death. I joined in reaffirming that Pact, yet I did so knowing in my heart that a certain terrible fact was true—that the power of the Pact is no longer enough—"

There was not a sound in the hall, not a breath of sound from the startled multitude. Had the roof suddenly peeled in upon the assembly, it would have gone unheeded, and even the indignant Brunnhauser sat as if transfixed, his chubby face gone chalk white.

"I should not need to recall to this assembly the history of that Pact," the Professor continued. "I need not remind you that it was with the Pact that the Church succeeded in its Holy Opposition to the Black Plague in Paris in 1615, thus saving untold millions from death at the mercy of that pestilence. How much that Holy Opposition turned the course of history we can only guess, but we do know that the writing of the Pact, and the Church's blessing of it, was unprecedented. The Pact was acceptable only in the hope that far greater evil, the evil of a sweeping, killing horror, could be stopped." The Professor paused, his eyes seeking the faces of the Assembly. "We have all read the Kalendar, relating how those ancient Physicians witnessed the materialization of the Demon Gonwal, the Controller of the Pestilence, saw him bow to the will of the Dark Master and work on the side of men, by virtue of the Pact. They gazed in horror at Gonwal's face, and they saw Gonwal draw the plague from the blackened corpses of men and transfer it to the rats of the alleys and streets; they watched as Gonwal's rats did their furious dances of death on the streets—and the Plague was stopped. Indeed, in those days the League with Gonwal was strong,

the very foundation of our modern art of medical sorcery. And it isn't strange that those Physicians used their spells and incantations without question, in complete faith. It isn't strange that those same magical methods have been handed down from Physician to Neophyte, in the dark halls of the Infirmaries, even as they are today. And yet we fight a new Plague in my city today which cannot be checked by the mightiest magical powers we know." His eyes blazed down at them, and his voice was hard and bitter. "Our magic is failing, our spells grow weaker by the day, and we are helpless to know why, helpless to reinforce them. Who knows the nature of the diseases that plague us? Do any of you? We are like blind men, working in a darkness we do not begin to understand . . . yet we are held helpless to try to learn by those very men who are supposed to be leading us. All of us, even as Neophytes, have grown from bits of seaweed and the entrails of rats the potently foaming broths which, when quaffed in strong faith, have done their curious work, vanquishing the fever from the brows of children, rebalancing the humors and fighting back the jaundices. We have all seen the grey-green sporulating growth which arises from dead mice and oily rags when they are placed together with the proper incantation and prayers—but who knows what quality there is in such a growth to heal the most morbid inflammation, even in the hands of the youngest Neophyte? Not even our good colleague Brunnhauser knows that, yet he forbids any study of those potions to determine what magic lies in them—*And not one of us knows the nature of our own magic—*"

There was an angry roar from the platform as Professor Brunnhauser, his face livid, sprang to his feet. "Did you hear him?" he screamed. "Sacrilege! The effrontery and blasphemy of this man! These are the words of an unbeliever—you heard him! He would cast aside the very foundation of our medical powers. What could he seek to find in his studies? The secrets of life and death? What he says is impudence and heresy!" He paused, his face black. "No, indeed, we have nothing we can learn, it is not for us to look farther than the League with Gonwal has already led us. We have the ultimate in medical sorceries now at our command; who cares why the poultices cure, why the humors rebalance? Enough that they do, unless the victim is a sinner, and worthy only for death anyway. And if this man's city is stricken, perhaps we can conclude that that plague is only just reward

for his evil thoughts—"

There were tired lines on Professor Ireland's face as he stood waiting, eyes closed, for the other to stop. But at the last sentence his eyes opened wide with anger. "A fitting reply for one who is too fat and corrupt to dare let new ideas creep in," he cried bitterly. "So all who die are evil anyway! A comfortable policy indeed, to go about in the midst of suffering with a ruddy face and an expanding paunch, muttering benign, platitudes, and doing nothing but blame the devil for what your powers cannot do! I say experiment, study new sorceries, try new potions, seek out the true secrets of the old spells. I say throw out the old, fat, lazy men, and seek out the new knowledge they fear so much—" He turned his eyes to Brunnhauser, eyes cold and full of contempt. "You say the Plague in my city is a curse I have brought upon myself, and you refuse to give me freedom to try fighting the plague my own way. Then I challenge you. Let the city be divided in half, with one half in *your* care, with all the ancient power of Gonwal behind you—and give me a free hand in the other half to study, and experiment, and try new sorceries. And then we shall see what magic can *really* do!

Brunnhauser glared at him for a long moment, then threw his gavel down with a crash, and stalked grimly off the platform. And Professor Ireland sank down in his seat, breathing a silent prayer, unaware and oblivious of the pandemonium breaking loose on all sides of him.

Even with the radio and television coverage of the plague-stricken area, it was difficult for anyone who had not actually been there to comprehend the ferocity of the pestilence that lay over the city of Philadelphia. In a wintry blanket of fog and drizzle, the great city lay like a corpse as the special transport came in for a landing with Professor Ireland returning from the Congress. The yellow lights from the airport were unattended, and as the limousine crept through the night streets toward St. Ignatius' Infirmary, the deathlike fog breathed an air of indescribable gloom. It was not that the disease had not been seen before—indeed, it had been reported far and wide throughout the land for many years, but never before had it appeared in such virulent form, nor in such epidemic proportions.

But it had crept into the city, spreading down from the north and west into the suburbs, then catching like a wild blaze to speed

to all portions of the metropolis. The first danger signs were the rose-colored spots on the abdomen of the victim; soon he would be engulfed in a burning fever which lasted for days and weeks while he grew thin, unable to eat, wasting away until his skeleton showed through, and he could no longer drag himself from his bed. His breath would come in great gasps, and then, after many days of agony, the agony would be ended, and the victim would go to join the many others who also fell before the onslaught. Whole families fell, and though the medical workers fought with their most powerful spells, the pestilence continued to grow with each day's reports.

On all sides the Professor had heard the wondering cries, the pitious prayers. What caused it, why did it happen? He did not know, and the knowledge that he did not know cut him to the quick. It might have been caused by overexposure to the wind, or by eating raw onions, or even from bathing in the Schuylkill River in the dark of the moon, for all he knew, and he had little time to speculate, with the mounting number of dead and dying.

The ravaging effects of the plague on the staid old city were harder still for anyone to imagine who had not walked the death-haunted streets. The television 'copters hovered in the grey sky like grim vultures, but their pictures were incomplete, they did not tell the full story of misery lying below them. Death was everywhere, walking the cobblestone streets, haunting the narrow alleys, flying in grim silence over the slate rooftops. Early in the morning the clop-clop of the horsedrawn carts could be heard, the street-cleaning wagons long beloved by the natives of that city even in that mechanized age, now carrying their ghastly burdens out to the public burying grounds to the west of the city. The city had been transformed to a huge infirmary; the subway tunnels and underground passageways in the heart of the city housed thousands of the sick and dying; beds of every type and description filled the historic City Hall, and lined Market Street for blocks, covered over with poor canvas to keep out the continual, gloomy rain. And among the rows of cots the occasional figure of nurse or Physician was seen, moving from victim to victim, sleep-drugged, hardly able to murmur the incantations and spells once so powerful.

Professor Ireland met his workers in a special conference in the torch-lit Chamber of Medicine at

the Infirmary. Sadly he took the sheaf of reports, of dead, of dying, of new cases; then he put them aside, and looked up at the tired group of Physicians before him. "We have a chance," he murmured. "Brunnhauser had to accept the challenge, of course. He and his men are taking the western and southern portions of the city; we will take Center city, and the north. We have no time to dally. And I think you understand our plan—"

All the heads nodded, and Professor Ireland smiled tiredly. "Somewhere, there is something in common, some common denominator in all the victims dying of the plague. No one here in the Infirmary has been stricken yet, at least none living here and eating here, and none of us have had time for protective Rites, whether they be antiquarian hog-wash or not. But people all around us have fallen. Our job is to search for anything, everything which might be a cause for the deaths. Perhaps some ghostly spirit walks among us, touching some, not touching others —if so, we must find him. And having found him, we must strike him dead—" His voice trailed off, and his face went pale as he groped for his chair. One of the Physicians cried out in alarm, moving forward to help him. "It is nothing," said the Professor weakly. "Nothing. I'm weak from the trip, that's all —"

"You're sure? You haven't seen the spots?"

"No, it's not the fever—I'd tell you if it were. I'm just tired." He looked up feebly, his eyes burning. "There's no time to lose, so go now." Then he turned his attention once more to the reports.

It came and went, quickly, cruelly. Sometimes the Professor would be caught in the middle of a sentence, and double up in convulsive agony; sometimes he managed to hide the attacks until he could reach privacy to wait, gritting his teeth until they were over. Sometimes he almost imagined he saw hallucinations in the course of an attack—visions of men and women in strange dress, visions of tall buildings, brief glimpses of shiny palaces of Medicine, where everyone wore white clothes, and bottles of potions and shiny bright instruments sat on shelves, spotless clean. But as quickly as the picture would flit through his mind the seizure would disappear, and he would sit panting and weak, hoping against another. And the surer he became that it was *not* the Plague attacking, the more certain he became of the true sources of the seizures.

Early one morning a worker

came in, face flushed, and thrust the daily reports before the Professor in his study. "Look," he said angrily. "Look at what that monster is doing!"

It was a map of the city, pinpointing the spots where dead had been found, the normal distribution he had been seeing morning after morning. And then he looked closer, and his face set in harder lines. "Right along the dividing line," he murmured. "I knew Brunnhauser was a dishonest man. But I never thought he'd stoop so low—"

"We caught them," the worker said softly. "A crew of men spotted them last night, carrying dozens of bodies across the line, dumping them in the streets on our side."

Ireland nodded. "And statistics will be the proof, of course. Crude, unbelievably crude. But there are other things he is doing that are not so crude." He motioned to the other. "I want to give you something, John. My job will be yours, if something happens to me, and I fear something is happening to me. But we have a clue, a possible solution to this terrible plague."

"You mean you've found what it is, how it spreads?" John's eyes goggled.

"We *may* have found how it spreads."

"And how do you think—?"

The Professor looked at him closely. "By water," he said.

The other blinked, not comprehending. "You mean—something about bathing—?"

"Drinking. Oh, I know — it sounds incredible that *water*, however brackish, could conceivably be connected with this plague. Yet we have drunk clean Artesian well water here, and have all been spared, while those in the cities—" He shrugged. "We don't know. If it's right the workers will know soon, and we may see a way to control the disease. But I fear we may not get a chance—"

The other looked at him closely. "You've been ill," he said, horrified.

"Not ill," said Ireland, weakly. "Something worse than illness, I fear. Brunnhauser must win this challenge. He knows he must win it, or Sacred Medicine, as he knows it and leads it, will never survive. If he loses, there will be changes that will leave him a ridiculed and broken man. So he calls other forces than Gonwal to help him —blacker forces—"

The man called John stared. "The punishment for *that* kind of Pact is too grave—" he exclaimed.

"And yet I have heard whisperings about our friend. I have heard that he has cursed other men who stood in his way. I have heard

curious tales, tales about black and magical sorceries which have shifted men completely out of the worlds they knew, into horrible parallel worlds where histories have been different. Just tales, of course, but I fear that Brunnhauser knows black magic, and if he is losing his magical fight against the Plague, he may in desperation attack me with the blacker kind—"

"But is there nothing you can do?"

Professor Ireland's eyes flashed angrily. "I could fight him back with the same—but that would be stooping to his level. No, I have a job here, and I must do it. And it must be done, in spite of Brunnhauser and his powers." He shook his head, as though disgusted with the idea, and walked weakly out for his daily round of the wards.

The work was almost overpowering, but slowly it progressed. The Plague found its way across the river to the out-lying towns and cities, and continued its killing pace, but slowly, very slowly, the effects of Professor Ireland's directions began to appear. The daily roster of new cases began to fall off, at first almost imperceptibly, then faster. The battle was far from won, but for the first time since the beginning, it seemed that his ridiculous water-theory might possibly be right.

But as the work looked more and more hopeful, the Professor looked worse and worse. Carefully he transferred all his records, all his observations and directions, to those who worked with him, charged them to carry on the work no matter what happened to him. They urged him to stop work, to go into hiding, but he steadfastly refused even to take the simplest protective Rites. There was no doubt that he was suffering some dreadful affliction; daily his face grew more gaunt, and his eyes were large and haunted. His seizures became more and more frequent, and more violent: more than once he was seen to let out a cry and grasp desperately at some solidly anchored object, as if some invisible force were trying to snatch him away, and once he was heard to mutter deliriously about being "transferred", but the seizures always passed, leaving him whiter and weaker every time.

And then, one night, he could stand it no longer. John, the Physician who had worked closest with him, found the Professor dressing carefully in his full cabalistic garb, complete with richly brocaded surplice with the Cross-and-Serpent blazoned on the front, and the little square berretta of the Physician-Sacerdos Exemplary. Gravely

John went into the Chamber of Medicine and laid out the chalk lines, the candles and the books, the cabinet of ingredients, and all the symbolic formulae necessary for the Physician's Solemn Rites of Protection. And then the Professor motioned him to wait outside the Chamber, his face gaunt. "I didn't want to do this," he told the younger man. "I still don't know if its protective power can hold me. But the forces striking at me are too great, I can no longer hold out myself. It's like a terrible, frightening rush of wind, and if the Rites will not help me, nothing will—" He left his final orders for the direction of the fight against the Plague, and started with slow steps for the center of the Chamber.

But he never reached the center of the room, and he never learned whether the protective rites would have helped him or not. Quite suddenly the Chamber was filled with a howl of cold wind, swirling the Professor's gown like a myriad grasping fingers; the Professor let out a hoarse cry, almost a groan of despair. And then, in a crackle of blue-white light, he disappeared as completely as if he had never been there—

Dr. Martin Dressler, Chief of Psychiatry of the Bellefont Memorial Sanatorium, glanced across the consulting room at the strange black-robed figure sitting there. He returned his eyes to the heavy sheaf of onion-skin he had been reading on the desk before him; then once again he picked up the enclosed letter, bearing the City Psychiatric Hospital letterhead.

"Dear Dr. Dressler," (the letter read). "I am referring this patient to you somewhat in the spirit of desperation, with the enclosed complete transcript of his case history, which I trust you will study with great care. You have undoubtedly read of the case already in the local press. According to the most reliable reports, the man appeared, quite suddenly, out of nowhere, in the middle of rush-hour traffic in downtown Philadelphia, claiming loudly that he had been the victim of some sort of medieval sorcery.

At the time, he was wearing the long black robe with the gold-embroidered symbol on the breast, and the odd little box-like hat—he will probably still be wearing them, for he steadfastly refuses to remove them. The police took him in for vagrancy and disturbing the peace, and sent him here to us, still loudly insisting that he was a 'doctor' who had been propelled here by magical means from the heart of a 'plague' in the middle of Philadelphia. This part of his story was

most confusing; however, plague or no plague, he was discovered in the routine medical check to be the most dangerous typhoid fever carrier to be spotted in Pennsylvania for years. (Needless to say, every precaution was taken to clear *that* up with adequate antibotic therapy before we proceeded with the psychiatric study.)

"The man claims he comes from an alternate world, where medical knowledge is three centuries behind times, and plagues are controlled by black magic, with the help of some sort of gentlemen's agreement with the Devil—the patient's delusion is remarkably detailed and fixed, and he refuses to alter his story in any way, as you will see. Indeed, he followed his own medical processing with the most peculiar mixture of excitement and amazement, as though he had never seen a syringe and needle before. But most upsetting was his effect on the other psychiatric patients here. The man seemed to regard our treatment of psychiatric cases with a high degree of ill-concealed amusement, and even offered to supplement our work with his own cabalistic attempts. Finally, he was discovered one evening with five of our most hopeless patients, placing them in a hexagon, chanting spells at them, and calling on his diabolical helper, whom he calls 'Gonwal' to 'drive the evil spirits from them.' (Curiously, all five of the patients seem to have improved remarkably after what must have been a severely traumatic experience—doubtless some regressive response to the witch-doctor mumbo-jumbo he was handing them.)

"In my opinion, the patient should have careful specialized study, and I am sending him to you in hopes you will have better luck than I—"

The psychiatrist tossed the letter on the desk, and stared at the black-robed old man. After a long moment he said, "What *were* you trying to do with those patients?"

Professor Henry Ireland spread his hands tiredly. "I am a Physician," he said. "Those people obviously were possessed of evil spirits—"

The psychiatrist nodded. "—and you were naturally just practicing your skill." He paused for a moment, regarding the strange figure closely. "They call you a witch-doctor—" He held up his hand when he saw the Professor's face darken. "No offense," he said gently. "We've been similarly accused ourselves." He stared at the old man for a long time, then shook his head. "It's incredible," he murmured. "Still fighting typhoid plagues—driving out spirits—"

Professor Ireland leaned for-

ward, his eyes pleading. "But it is *true!*" he whispered. "There are alternate worlds—yours and mine—it's true! I was thrust here by blackest rites, by a man who would doom our world to eternal plagues to retain his power over Sacred Medicine. I know what you are thinking, but it's not true, I am not sick in mind. I *couldn't* be. We have plagues, yes, horrible plagues that decimate cities, even with the powers of Gonwal to help us—but there has been no sickness of the mind in my world for *three hundred years*—"

The psychiatrist stared at the old man's earnest face. A chill went up his back, and he felt a strange pounding in his throat. "If it *were* true—" he said softly —"this devil's helper of yours this Gonwal—must he help you when you call him, *no matter where you are?*"

"We command him by the Cross and Serpent, through all eternity —no matter where we are."

The psychiatrist stood up sharply, walked to the window, stared out at the long ward buildings of the sanatorium, his mind racing. Then he turned to face the Professor. "You want to go back, don't you?"

Professor Ireland's eyes blazed. "I *must* go back. There are many ways that it might be possible—it would take time, nothing more. But you have magic in this world of fight plagues—powerful magic. If you could teach me, in sacred trust—teach me the magic of your silver needle—there would be no more plagues in my world, there would be an end to the fat tyrants of Sacred Medicine—"

The psychiatrist nodded slowly. "I could teach you much of our magic. I might even help you find a way back."

Professor Ireland's eyes narrowed. "And in return for your generosity—?"

The psychiatrist glanced fearfully at the door, and when he spoke, his voice was very low. "You could teach me *your* magic," he whispered. "Perhaps we—you and I—and Gonwal—perhaps we could reach an agreement."

Professor Ireland sat back in his chair, and for the first time a ghost of a smile played at his lips. "I feel sure we can," he said.

THE END

THE CRAZY MAN

By R. J. McGregor

On the surface Belleville looks much like any other small town and, basically, it is. But Belleville has a secret, and they're not telling anybody about the day Doc Janney came home.

Illustrated by H. W. McCauley

IF a stranger came asking, we'd tell him nothing happened here Saturday morning. Belleville is that kind of a Midwest, shrinking, six-hundred-population town. But something *big* happened, right between my service station and Clem Brady's cafe in the middle of the street.

It's been my job, fourteen years as deputy sheriff, to keep the peace. That's why I had to shoot old Doc Janney in public Saturday. There's still evidence, but it will never be reported. It can't be . . .

Being the law isn't much of a job here, so I run the station. It was my father's blacksmith shop. I put in the gas pumps and the soda-pop machine. It's still got the four big elm trees and the six steel-slat benches he made because he liked to have people around.

The only way you could tell it was Saturday was by counting the bench loafers, the town codgers. Most of them still work during the week. It was hot and muggy. You could smell the potroast across the street—Clem Brady's 'Sunday Special.' You could hear the flies buzzing twenty feet away it was so quiet, mostly.

You could tell it was June by the kind of weeds growing, the grass, the trees, crickets, birds, the sneeze-pollen in the air, and the way my dog, Razz, panted and shed hair around and wagged that monstrosity of a tail I'd never had

the heart to bob. Everybody in town thought Razz ought to be bobbed. About the only way you could tell what year it was would have been to look at the calendar. That's Belleville.

Seventy years ago our most distinguished citizen was born out on the old Johnson place—Doc Janney. He was twenty years before my time, but I hear he licked most of the men his age before he went east and took up teaching philosophy in a university. Taught thirty-one years, till his wife died. Then he just packed up and left all the big words behind and came home. He said country blood stays in you.

He came back five years ago. Spent a lot of time on my dad's benches. Wouldn't argue much with a man on religion or politics. Said he'd studied so much in his time he didn't know enough to argue. Not till he went looney. Then he really started arguing.

Told everybody he saw things in the sky. Things that weren't there. He even swore, one day, that a thing had landed on his farm. And that *little* people had got out of the thing and had stayed a while for coffee, talking.

Well—the county seat newspaper heard of it and out came the reporters. Then the welfare people, then the warrant. They tied

up his university pension.

At the sanity hearing we took oaths and testified what the doc had told us. The state psychiatrists examined him.

They sent him down to the State Mental Hospital by the river at Exiter.

Doc was otherwise sane — I'd swear to that—but he believed he'd seen those 'flying saucer' things. He was always a tough bird. I think he would have preferred to die, rather than change his story. I talked to him about it. Talk about being pig-headed!

But he said they were kind to him at Exiter, respected him. Took his word that he wouldn't run away. And he loved to fish, so they let him out the main gate each afternoon, alone, and he fished in the river without a guard. I fished with him a dozen times.

One time he sat there with me and tears came in his eyes.

"Jeb," he said to me, "you don't believe me, either."

What could I say.

Then Doc smiled, faraway, happy, crazy. He sat there bobbing his line and he said:

"They came to visit me. And I'm going to ask them to prove I'm sane. They'll do it, too."

He caught a catfish just then, and I was grateful to that fish.

That was four years ago. He disappeared from the hospital. Some thought he drowned — suicide, but not me. Nobody thought him dangerous. It was for his own good that they drew up the new warrant and gave a copy to me. Meantime, we nearly forgot him.

But Saturday morning we saw a man walking down Three-Mile road from Four Corners. Right after a pickup farm truck went past and raised a dust cloud. We put on our glasses and sized him up and started wagering soda-pops on his identity.

Somebody said: "Doc Janney," and we all stood up, staring.

He came closer. It looked like Doc had lost that arthritic forward-bend in his back. Mighty spry for seventy.

There was a little ripple of excitement on the benches and somebody said, plain as day:

"Doc's casting a shadow, too." That's the kind of a town Belleville is. And somebody else got up, casually, and sauntered pretty fast over to Clem's cafe and Clem came right out front and stood there, with a growing group on his side. Must have been twenty men on my side already.

Doc came up and stood ten feet beyond the gas pumps and just looked at us—mostly at me.

"You've got another warrant for

me, Jeb," he said.

I nodded.

"You intend to arrest me?"

"It's my job."

He shook his head and said, "I won't let you. I can't leave Belleville with every friend I've got here in this world thinking I'm a lunatic."

He didn't look insane, and he looked like he meant it. We shuffled our feet. Some of the men sat down, quietly. One went over to Doc and reached out and touched him — just to make sure — and came back nodding.

If Doc hadn't been so old, he'd have looked like a man come to town looking for trouble. I felt there was no point in prolonging it, so I went inside and got the warrant and took it to him. He read it and put it in a pocket, shaking his head. Then he looked up at the sky, as if he still could see things there.

"Come on over and have a soda and sit a while," I said.

"While you phone the sheriff?" he said.

I nodded.

My dog, Razz, went over and nuzzled Doc's leg and wagged that monstrosity of a tail and sat down in the dirt, growling a little —which was unusual.

"You've got to believe me," Doc said. "They did visit me on the farm. They took me from the hospital at Exiter. That's where I've been all this time."

"Sure," I said.

"I've got a weapon in my hand," Doc said.

There was nothing in his hand.

He stood there and he called: "Come and get me."

Some of the loafers had been standing around him, almost in a circle. They felt the fires burning in old Doc and they started backing away in all directions.

One of them, backing up, gave a sudden cry and threw up an arm and then ducked and scuttled like a rabbit clear across the street. Over there he backed flat against the brick wall and just stood.

It seemed Doc eyed the man with satisfaction.

I hadn't used my badge and gun in six months, officially. I do practice shooting a lot, because I don't like the thought of killing a man needlessly. But I'd heard that the sight of a lawman's gear has an effect on certain deranged minds. So I put them on and came out as a deputy should—facing a maniac.

All the men, and a few women now, standing around, demanding silently that I do my duty. They were very curious, a bit excited. Not afraid yet. A little old man like Doc couldn't do much.

Razz was close to Doc, growling, sensing Doc's hostility, beginning to bark.

A crowd of people can put you in an awful spot. Even if they're your friends. None of them had ever seemed to feel I wasn't man enough to do my duty. But now they started edging away, watching *me*—not Doc. It's a bad feeling.

Except for the time when I actually went up and handed Doc the warrant, I'd stayed away from him. I thought he would read it and give up gracefully, and keep his dignity. I knew how important dignity was to him. But he stood there, and everybody looked at me. And I'd already dressed up like an Old West sheriff, just on account of Doc, and it made me feel mighty bad.

But I came around the west gas pump, slow, and toward him. And I hated every step, because when there was no more walking to do, I'd have to grab him, like you would a bum, or a drunk, or a stray dog. With everybody looking. It was the first time I'd ever wanted to turn in my badge.

It got so quiet, between my gravel-crunching steps, you could hear the flies buzzing.

Razz wasn't trained for anything. Just a good old dog. He started growling, barking, wagging his tail, prancing between us.

I told him to shut up, and he did.

Then I noticed he wasn't wagging his tail. I bent down and stared. I reached and picked up the tail. Razz had a two-inch stump, cut off neat as a razor slice, already healed. No blood. And the dog didn't even miss it.

I put the tail behind my back and snapped my fingers and the dog leaped up and put his front paws on my thigh and looked at my face the way a dog will. And he started wagging his hind end, and only then he must have felt something missing.

But just then a flea got him in the left shoulder and he hunkered down and went after it, so I put the tail up on top of the gas pump and looked at Doc.

"You know I wouldn't hurt that dog," Doc said. "My weapon seals off tissue and sensation as it cuts." He backed off a couple of steps.

His hand was still empty.

"Jeb," he said. "Listen to me. My friends from the sky can't understand you humans. To them, this thing in my hand is a surgical instrument only. They have no weapons. They've come here for years, trying to make friends. But they've found only a dozen people who would so much as *talk to them*. The others become panicky,

call the air force, have them shot down. So they don't let you see them anymore."

"Sure," I said. I tried to make my voice soothing.

"All they ever wanted," Doc persisted, "was an element, a common earth mineral. Just a small amount. So they're here now, taking it out of streams, out of water washing down to the sea, wasted anyway."

I put my hand on my gun.

"Look over your shoulder," Doc said.

I didn't look until something sizzled over my right shoulder and there was a ripping sound. The big glass ornament atop the gas pump was being cut, without shattering, the way a knife slips through soft butter. Then both halves of the ornament fell and broke. Doc's eyes met mine.

"It can slice a house or a truck or a man," he said softly.

"Whatever it is," I said, "drop it."

"Yeah," Clem Brady called across the street, "make him drop it."

Doc shook his head and grinned.

Did you ever watch a young bucko liquored up in a tavern, a fellow who loves to be worked into a fight, when some easy mark starts asking for it—the way his eyes light up, the way he grins. That's how Doc looked at me, at everybody.

Clem Brady hollered at me: "Take him, Jeb."

Doc hefted his hand, like he was feeling the invisble gun in his grasp.

"It's got a barrel and a handle and a trigger," he said. "But it's not supposed to be used as a gun, even if they can make it explode like a hand grenade. It simply reflects light into our next-up continuum which we can't see. But it's real." He kept grinning at me like that. "Isn't it real, Jeb?"

I looked quickly at the crowd. My friends. Doc's friends.

"What are you waiting for?" somebody hollered.

"Yeah," somebody else said. "Ain't scared, are you, Jeb?"

I knew I'd have to hurt Doc, so I was scared. He pointed his right hand at me, three fingers crooked, as if around a gun butt, the fourth curled as if around a trigger. I drew my gun, a .38 caliber police special revolver. I held it out and pointed up, on safety. I thought the gesture would be enough, and I tried not to think of Razz' tail and the pump ornament. I tried to think of Doc as a maniac. An inch of my barrel dropped off.

"Jeb," he said, "a man's reputation among his own people is all

he's got. That's why I have to do this. To prove I'm not insane."

"Doc," I said, "That's why I've got to do this. I'm the law."

I shot him once through the fleshy part of the upper right arm, missing the bone. I saw his right hand go limp and open as his left grabbed for the wound. And I heard something clunk to the ground at his feet—where nothing had fallen.

I went over and pushed him back and I knelt and groped on the ground until my hand found something gun-sized and gun-shaped and invisible. I picked it up in my left and hefted it and pointed it carefully into the ground.

Doc stood there holding his arm, bleeding a lot, looking at me, then up in the sky. I looked up and saw nothing.

Half a dozen men started moving in to grab Doc now.

"Stand back, there," I hollered. "All of you."

They knew I meant it.

"I knew you'd shoot," Doc grinned. "If I made you, and with all of them cheering you on, you had to."

Until he said that, I'd had the sick feeling Doc had acted a lot saner than I. But a man who's been shot — even a dirty flesh wound like that—doesn't beam. Maybe he gives you a sickly grin, acting brave. Doc was grinning ear-to-ear, feeling no pain, and that's not normal.

Doc pointed up. "Jeb," he said, "a couple of friends of mine are a few feet over your head in a machine, healing my arm. They're a little different, but there's nothing miraculous about them. They're very loyal to a friend in trouble. They're *people*, too."

Doc took off his coat, and he rolled up his sleeve and flexed his wounded arm and wiped off the drying blood. I saw two small puckered scars where the bullet had ripped in and out. I looked at the pool of blood on the ground, on his coat, his shirt sleeve.

So did everybody else. And Doc went around like a cocky teenage boy, showing off his arm muscle.

There must have been a good sixty people round now, whispering like they were in church. Staring at Doc's arm, then at the blood, on him, on the ground. Staring up into the empty blue sky. They started backing away, slowly, quietly, the way hounds might when a wounded big cat suddenly shows life. But they had their ears cocked.

Doc stood there, looking at them. He gave a big sigh and squared his shoulders and he used

his eyes, as if he were memorizing every blessed inch of Belleville a man could ever see from there, the buildings, trees, streets, the old dirt road. even my dog.

"Come over here," he said. He sort of groped in the air shoulder-high, and then grasped something that wasn't there.

I came over.

"Jeb," he said. "I made a mistake. I should never have come back. It's nice. I loved it when I was a boy. But I'm wrong here." He pointed up. "I should have stayed at the university after Martha died. My friends, up there, would have found me anyway. But I felt so badly about Exiter that I had to come back and do this. You know what I mean?"

I nodded.

"Then come over here and feel this. Where my hand is."

I did. I felt it.

"The little surgical instrument," Doc said. "You know what the government would do with it."

I handed it back. I saw it bulge the material in his coat pocket.

"You'd better do something about Razz' tail," he said. "And I'm sorry about the gas pump."

"That's easy fixed," I said.

"Shake hands?" he said.

We did, till tears came in his eyes.

Then he handed me back my warrant.

"If anybody in town ever sees that crazy Doc Janney again, be sure to have him locked up, will you, Jeb?"

"Sure," I said.

He squared his shoulders and said, "Well, time to go."

We didn't see any ladder, or any space ship. But we saw him go up the ladder—the one I'd felt—and we saw a circular door open, and we did see him go inside and close that door. And that's all we saw or heard.

Sure, the people here talked it over, still do, always will.

But if it gets outside and any stranger comes asking, he'll be wasting his time, even if small-towners do love to talk.

Because we remember why Doc Janney was locked up, and who helped lock him with talk.

And the folks here in Belleville aren't that crazy.

THE END

THE CLUB HOUSE

By Rog Phillips

WHAT is science fiction? What is science fiction fandom? Neither of those questions are as simple as they look. Editors of professional science fiction magazines such as *Universe* believe they know the answer to the first question. They have to believe that in order to form judgments on whether to buy or reject stories submitted to them by writers. Writers believe they know the answer to that first question, or they would write different stories than they do. The final judges, you readers, are the only ones who can afford to admit you don't know the answer to the first question.

A year and a half ago in Los Angeles, Forry Ackerman, who has an enormous collection of everything even remotely connected to science fiction, dragged out a copy of a magazine called the Electrical Experimenter. It was one of Hugo Gernsbak's forerunners to *Amazing Stories*. In the readers section was a letter I had written, in which I suggested we readers form a correspondence club or fan club. That was before the first science fiction fan club came into existence—even before the term *science-fiction* had been coined, I believe.

:I can remember that just like it was yesterday. There were a lot of the readers of the *Electrical Experimenter* who felt the same desire to go behind the magazine they bought on the newsstand and get acquainted with others who found the subject of the magazine very fascinating. In fact, I got over thirty letters in just one day, and altogether I got over a hundred. I don't remember the number now. It may have been over two hundred. There were so many that I could not have possibly bought the postage stamps to answer them all, so, feeling the responsibility of the thing, I bundled all the letters into a box and sent them to one of the letter writers who had offered to help form the club and asked him to carry on. I never heard from him, and after a while I forgot about the whole thing. It was too bad that

it turned out that way. I was living in Milwaukee at the time, and although I didn't know it, your editor Ray Palmer also lived there. Maybe he was one of those who wrote me, since as I recall, there were three or four letters from Milwaukee.

It would be nice to know if any of those who wrote me so long ago are in science fiction circles now. "Ships that pass in the night . . ." If I had only known what the future would be, how interesting it would have been to have made a list of the names of those who wrote to me. Maybe Ray Palmer was one, Forry Ackerman another, Sam Moskowitz, Will Sykora, Tom Gardner, Weinbaum, maybe even Lovecraft! If one of those letters was from Lovecraft it would be worth far more now than the money it would have taken me to get the ball rolling then. (I snapped up the first issue of Amazing Stories when it hit the stands too, read it, and threw it away, not knowing that today it would be worth fifty dollars or more!)

But ships that pass in the night depart, and it wasn't until 1945 that I started writing science fiction. I had never quite let go of that first and stillborn attraction toward the field and toward those also attracted to it. Yet, even today I can't say with any completeness what that attraction consists of. The romance of science? Partly. With those pre-stf magazines, the Electrical Experimenter and the Chemical Experimenter, I used to devour every page and spend hours working out the experiments detailed in the articles. A Leydon jar made from tinfoil and a Mason jar cost my dad a small fortune in burned out fuses, and I wonder now that I didn't get electrocuted trying to charge the Leydon jar with house current and a ground wire.

And my chemical lab! I had it upstairs in my room, and there were stains on the ceiling from experiments that blew up. I sold newspapers on the streets to get money to buy the chemicals and the glassware. I remember one night there was going to be a prayer meeting at our house, and Dr. Lake, the minister, came for dinner. After dinner he went up to my lab with me and I showed him how to generate smoke rings by boiling a phosphorus stick in a sodium hydroxide solution in a closed Florence flask, with the fumes led through a glass tube to an escape point under water. When the gas bubbles reached the air they exploded, making the smoke rings. Of course the smoke rings were phosgene gas, a deadly poison gas used quite effectively in World War I, but that was unimportant. Dr. Lake soon

got a violent headache, and all the good people who came to the prayer meeting also developed headaches, and you can easily believe there was some devout praying that night, and many miraculous healings after the phosgene gas drifted out the open windows.

Ah, those were the days. I miss Dr. Lake. One time he read in the newspaper about the newly discovered Hysenburg Principle of Uncertainty and some speculations on the behavior of electrons that indicated they might have minds of their own. He dropped over and discussed it with me wondering if it might eventually be proven that electrons have free will. I did some deep thinking for him and decided it was more likely it would eventually be proven that neither electrons nor people have free will. He treated my answer with great respect. He was a wonderful man, and I'm glad the world is full of so many just like him.

There is a romance to science, and to the fertile fields the imagination leaps to from science, that can't be equalled by anything else. That romance isn't for just dry science, but for what man can do with and by science. It is such a wonderful thing that instinctively, once you experience the grandeur of that attraction, you want to find others to share it with. There is no way to pin down that romance. It has ten thousand different aspects, from the sheer beauty of a solved problem in mathematics to the new horizons revealed by a great stf story.

When it hits you, you know you are hit by it. Chad Oliver, one of the best of today's stf authors, once told me how it hit him. He was a little fellow then, not the giant Texan he is today. He was getting over a very serious illness. I can't recall offhand whether it was rheumatic fever or polio, but he was doing a lot of painful and laborious bicycle riding to coax strength back into his legs. That particular day he bought a new kind of magazine in town and took it home. It was about something called science fiction. He started a story. Then he read the whole magazine. Then he got on his bicycle and forced his weak legs to pump him back to town where he bought every science fiction magazine he could find. His experience is typical.

Today he is an archaeologist, but his love for science fiction still holds him to the field through his story writing. A similar case is Dr. Tom Gardner of New Jersey, one of the world's leading gerontologists. Through his love of science fiction he decided to go to college and become a scientist, and perhaps help

to bring true some of the great vistas revealed through fictional exploration of the possibilities of science.

There are probably thousands of todays leading scientists who entered science by first falling in love with its fiction. And there are thousands who didn't, but are still as avid fans as ever, some of them having accumulated giant libraries, some of them engaging in activities that are known as purely fan activities, such as publishing a fanzine. And of course it is impossible to become a good writer of science fiction stories without being a fan at heart. Ray Bradbury, for example, was a prolific fan writer, with stories in dozens of fanzines, before he ever sold his first professional story. The majority of todays stf writers, good *or* bad, came from the ranks of active fandom.

Most of you reading this department of *Universe* are already active fans. I am not so much interested in entertaining you as I am in reaching the few of you who are reading your first science fiction magazine, and who might be experiencing that first "falling in love with stf" wonder and delight—lessened today by a familiarity with Buck Rogers, Captain Video, etc., plus a few grade D movies, but still —wonder and delight.

The purpose of the CLUB HOUSE is to welcome you to the big family of oldtimers who went through what you're experiencing now, last month or last year or years ago, and who today find continuing satisfaction by corresponding with one another, publishing mimeographed or otherwise printed amateur magazines, attending local science fiction clubs that meet regularly, and attending the regional and national science fiction conventions.

It will be the purpose of the CLUB HOUSE to keep you informed on how and where to obtain the fanzines being published, and how to find out where there is a local club you can visit. Maybe after you get acquainted the publishing bug will bite you too, and then you will send me your fanzine to review so that you can get a hundred or so subscribers to make the thing worth while.

At the beginning of this article I asked two questions. The second one was, what is science fiction fandom? Or, more specifically, what is a science fiction fan? I have read other people's definitions of what a fan is and what he is not. Any argument as to whether a rocket enthusiast is a science fiction fan or not, whether flying saucer enthusiast is a fan or not, can be most easily settled—because, you see, *a fan is*

anyone who considers himself or herself a fan.

The purpose of the CLUB HOUSE will be to acquaint you with every phase of fan activities that wishes to invite your attention. It is not the purpose of the CLUB HOUSE to sit in judgment on fandom and announce that only fanzines or activities that Rog Phillips thinks meet certain standards of perfection will find outlet through these pages. As in the CLUB HOUSE during the years it appeared in *Amazing Stories*, I make a money back guarantee that you will get your money's worth in enjoyment and deep down satisfaction when you send for fanzines reviewed here. If you aren't satisfied, let me know and I will personally refund to you your quarter or dime or dollar that you paid for the fanzines.

The only fanzines I won't review are those who have all the subscribers they want and refuse to accept new subscribers at the time of the review. To you editors with a too full subscription list, please wait to send me your zine for review until you want subscribers. This is not an egoboo column for the sake of egeboo. And to you beginning fan editors whose mimeography isn't too good yet, don't be afraid to send me your fanzine. You'd be surprised what a few subscribers will do to boost your confidence and increase your skill at mimeography.

At the time of writing this issue of the CLUB HOUSE, with a deadline of May first, there has not been time for the previous issue announcing the appearance of the CLUB HOUSE as a regular feature of *Universe* to reach the stands. Consequently you readers must wait until the next issue to get an adequate listing of fanzines being currently published. This time I will review only three fanzines. These are:—

DESTINY: 25c; quarterly; Earl Kemp, 3508 N. Sheffield Ave., Chicago 13, Illinois. By the way, Earl is president of the Chicago Stf Society which holds meetings every other Wednesday at Ida Noyes Hall at the University of Chicago, starting at seven-thirty. Living in Chicago at the present time, I often attend these meetings and enjoy them. There is usually some notable of stf at each meeting. Frank Robinson attends regularly. So do Judy May and Ted Dikty, and sometimes Mark Reinsburg. Dr. E. E. Smith of the Skylark stories was there a month ago, and at the same meeting was Willy Ley who was passing through Chicago on a lecture tour. But the fans themselves are what make a club, and if you live in the Chicago area you will

find great enjoyment in joining this group.

Destiny is a professionally done photo offset job of printing. The cost of that eats up the quarter you will pay, so Earl supports his wife and two adorable little girls by doing something else for a living. I had dinner at his place not long ago and had a chance to meet his family.

Many of the articles and stories in Destiny are by members of the Chicago club. Roberta Collins had an excellent story in the last issue of Destiny. Edward Wood, author of an article that questions the classification of stf into professional and amateur writing is also a regular member, but is entering the army shortly. Mari Wolf, who has it in her to be a truly great writer, had a short story in Destiny. She lives in the Los Angeles, California area where there is another active stf club, The Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, whose address I can't remember offhand (though I could drive to the clubroom if I were there with my eyes blindfolded!). The Los Angeles group meets every week. If you live in that area you can find out about the meeting by calling F. J. Ackerman whose address is 915 S. Sherbourne Drive, L.A. 35. You can look up his phone number. Besides the fans you will occasionally meet such notables as Ray Bradbury, Van Vogt, E. Everett Evans, L. Major Reynolds, Chad Oliver, and Stu Byrne. Another regular member of the Los Angeles group is Roy Squires, publisher of

SCIENCE FICTION ADVERTISER: 20c; quarterly; 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, California. Roy is a quiet, pipe-smoking, likeable fellow who puts a great deal of effort into his fanzine to make it one of the best you will find. The stf artwork alone in Advertiser each issue is worth the 20c. The articles are generally along lines such as analyzing the writings of a single author, or discussion of some general phase of science fiction. Backbone of the fanzine is the ads offering books and back issue magazines for sale or trade, but even if you aren't interested in the ads you will find Advertiser worth a regular subscription. Roy has built up an impressive circulation list.

A year and a half ago I was living in Los Angeles and Roy helped me proofread the galleys for my ill-fated book, "Frontiers in the Sky." We spent hours over it. It was to be published by Shasta Publishers. They had great hopes for it, but they didn't get an order from the army or the navy for a few hundred copies, so they decided not to publish it.

The third fanzine I will review

this time is:

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c; bi-weekly; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd Ave., Flushing 54, N.Y. You might call this *the* news zine of stf. Other news zines have appeared on the scene from time to time, but none of them quite equalled F-T, and for a very good reason. Jimmy has been publishing his fanzine for many years, and is personally acquainted with every editor in the field. He has ways of finding out things almost before they happen. With his fanzine appearing twice a month, regular subscribers get the news while it's news. He also has correspondents all over the U. S. and in Europe, Canada, and Australia, so that you can get acquainted with what is going on in those countries in science fiction.

Mr. Taurasi lives in the greater New York area and is well acquainted with the several stf clubs that hold meetings there, such as the Eastern Science Fiction Association that meets in Newark, New Jersey, of which he is a member. If you live in Philly or anywhere on the east coast, he can tell you where your nearest club is. But the easiest way to find out is to subscribe to his newszine, because it carries that information too.

In fact, Fantasy-Times is just about standard equipment for any self-respecting fan—like a good pair of hiking shoes is to a mountain climber. It doesn't give you everything, but it does give you the news.

By next issue I will be able to bring you the general fanzines that carry everything from fan humor to fan fiction to fan poetry, published by kids on hand crank mimeo machines, by kids with nothing but a hekto pad, by semi-professional publishing hobbyists, by just about everybody from Texas all the way around the world back to Texas.

And I will say again what I have said before, that when the day comes that I receive a fanzine from Anyburgovitch, Russia in which uninhibited stf fans strut their stuff, world peace will be here. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have such a healthy world?

—Rog Phillips

You Can Master the Power of Your "Sixth Sense"

These Uncanny Experiences PROVE YOU Have a "Sixth Sense"!

Buried deep among the atoms of your inner mind there is a mysterious sixth sense which is capable of producing seeming miracles.

How often have you had the feeling someone was staring at you — then turned around and found that someone WAS staring at you? You hadn't seen that person. How did you know?

How many times have you been talking or thinking about a person — then suddenly he or she appears? You had no reason to expect him (or her). But your inner mind knew.

Do you ever have the premonition that something is going to happen — then, bingo! — that very thing DOES happen?

Have you ever started to say something at exactly the same instant that someone else started to utter the SAME words?

Have you ever had a dream — and then seen your dream become a reality just as your inner mind had pictured it?

We've all had uncanny experiences like these. You can't possibly explain them unless you admit that you DO have a sixth sense but this mysterious power is developed to a higher degree in some people than in others.

Some years ago the noted "father of modern psychology" Will James of Harvard, made the astonishing statement that most people use only 10% of their mental powers. The other 90% lies idle. Now at last science is making it easy for us to USE that vast reserve of brain power!

A few people seem to know instinctively the secret of harnessing this power. Others must learn. But once you learn the secret NOTHING is beyond your power — NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE!

This doesn't mean we can all be Einsteins, Edisons or Fords. It does mean that we can have the happiness, peace of mind and feeling of security — plus the success in our chosen work — which we have every right to want and expect!

Man Is Just Now Beginning to Learn the True Power of the Human Mind!

For almost a hundred years, scientists have known about and talked about atomic energy. It is only recently that something has been done about it.

Likewise, the most amazing and mysterious powers of the inner mind were known to ancient sages, wise men, alchemists and philosophers. Their knowledge of these marvelous forces never died. It has been passed down through the centuries by a few "in the know" each decade. Now these secrets are being brought to light for the first time. Now you and I can benefit by the previous knowledge of the inner mind — and learn how to put these forces to work!

As You Think — So You ARE!

This phrase comes from the Bible. It is just as true today as it was 2,000 years ago! But NOW we have the means to chart along the "right lines"! Now we know how much better we can make our lives by simply pressing and pushing to work the tremendous forces which have been lying dormant in our minds!

Of course you'd like to have a better home. A happier, fuller life. More understanding, respect and affection from your family, friends and associates. Greater success in your life work. More genuine security and peace of mind in this troubled world!

You can have all these things in abundance — and! Nothing is impossible — nothing is beyond your reach — when you know how to use The Secret of The Power Within You.

Ben Sweetland, known to millions throughout the United States as Radio's Consulting Psychologist and who has contributed many works in the field of applied psychology — quite accidentally discovered the direct contact between the two minds of man — and how one can — at will — call upon the great mental powers.

The personal pronoun "I" refers to the mental self. Sweetland has taught for years. When this word is added to another it becomes an instruction to self. "The only difference between the go-getter and the never-do-well" this psychologist published in 1915, is that one thinks in terms of "I Can" and the other in "I Can't!" He taught his followers to hold to the thought "I can" and on a large number of cases, they proved they could — they did think.

One great truth was definitely established. The words "I CAN" provided the direct path from the conscious mind to the subconscious mind, the use of which invested the power to swing the door to the open sesame.

Many years was a lonely spinster — poor financial — and resigned to a life of tragic boredom. "I Can" helped the sunshine of happiness to smile in her. A large circle of friends and a devoted husband came into being almost as though a magic wand had been used.

[illegible] Smith had a good singing voice but lacked the [illegible] use in full. "I Can" gave her direct [illegible] with her voice and she has since appeared [illegible] singer throughout the United States. [illegible] Yates was a [illegible] earning just enough to get [illegible]. Within days after gaining the "I Can" consciousness he started to expand. Today he operates a business employing 50 mechanics.

How You Can PROVE — at NO RISK — That This Secret Will Work Wonders for YOU

Follow the simple, step-by-step instructions given so clearly in "I CAN." Notice the wonderful changes that begin to take place in your spirit and personality AT ONCE. Feel the soul-satisfying glow of new self-confidence — the ability to DO all sorts of things you never thought you could before! Marvel at how much better you sleep as peacefully as a kitten at night — free of worries, doubts and fears!

A truly glorious experience is in store for you! Prove for yourself — in 30 days or less — what YOU can experience a change in your whole life — the miraculous and wonderful as thousands of others have enjoyed. You risk nothing. But you have a whole new world to gain. Don't delay a single minute. Clip the coupon now.

Your FREE GIFT — THE MAGIC MIRROR
See for Yourself Why You're — Almost Your Weaknesses — You Exactly How to Correct Them!

Reflected in your Magic Mirror [illegible] as others see you! This revolutionary new device enables you to look deeply into your inner being. Reveals all your weaknesses and your assets, including perhaps, many you never knew you had! Tells how you can make the most of your assets to gain your goals. Shows you the way to the utmost success you can enjoy. Solves all of your routine problems. This MAGIC MIRROR is yours to KEEP — absolutely FREE — whether or not you decide to keep "I CAN."

SEND NO MONEY! MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY

CADILLAC PUBLISHING CO., Dept. C-164
220 Fifth Ave., New York 1, N. Y.

Please rush my copy of Ben Sweetland's new book "I CAN" — THE KEY TO LIFE'S GOLDEN SECRETS, in plain wrapper. When delivered, I will deposit with postman only $2.95, plus few cents postage. I must be 100% delighted with actual results, or I will return the book within 30 days for a full refund.

FREE! Send me the MAGIC MIRROR — mine to keep even if I return the book.

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Editorial ★

(*Concluded from Page 2*)

sunk. After that he was just pubbing another stf mag. It was literally dead.

That's why I'm so glad to see a letter column again. I'm even gladder to see an editorial of the old kind.

On the subject of "The Club House," you gave it eight pages this ish. I'd like to suggest that Rog cut down on editorializing—say, three pages—and have reviews on five, unless there is something of great interest to discuss.

As for "Personals," anyone got the large-size Prince Valiant strips and copies of *Psychotic No. 3-No. 10*.

Any chance of a revived OW this Fall, maybe? And I hope USF'll be a happy mag from here on out.

Yours,

Sincerely and STFanatically,

Hank

P. S. The stories! The ones by Curtis and Cox were good. I'm starting the Robinson just as soon as I finish this letter. I notice his lead story for the April ScS has already been anthologised in *The Best Science-Fiction Novels*: 1954. I'll be looking for that Godwin, and Merril's, too.

The Jones cover was good, but McCauley was pretty standard. Do you mean to say we've got to wait until September for a Finlay cover? Gads!

That letter was from Hank Moskowitz, of Three Bridges, New Jersey. Hank used to write a letter discussing each issue of OW; he seldom missed. And, as he says, some of the things he wrote to and about the mag were pretty bitter. Bitter, but not *vindictive*. He congratulated us when he thought we'd merited it, and told us off when he thought he had a legitimate gripe—because he was *interested* in the magazine.

We've printed Hank's letter in the editorial because it was typical of the letters we've been receiving — letters expressing pleasure at the return of your features, of the columns where you can have your say. It made us downright happy to hear from all of you, and we realize that the next batch of letters probably won't be so much of the congratulatory and "welcome back" type—you'll be right in there yowling at us when we do something you don't like, and that's just what we want. Whether you call it a friendly magazine or a happy magazine or an OW-type magazine, what we want is to give you a *Universe* you'll like, and we're depending on you to let us know if we're hitting the mark.

AMERICANS LIKE US!

Read this

I'm not exactly a guy for passing out compliments, as my sf associates around the world will tell you, but a time comes when a person can no longer restrain himself and is forced to serve praise where such is called for. This is certainly the case when it comes to criticizing AUTHENTIC SCIENCE FICTION. It is by far the best sf magazine to reach me from your country.

Ronald S. Friedman
1980 East 8th St., Brooklyn 23, New York

I think your stories are all well above average quality. They are not overdramatic or hammy. I respect you for tending so much toward science—unlike so many American magazines.
610 Park Place, Pitts. 9, Pa. Bill Venable

These are unsolicited testimonials from American veteran fans who read Britain's most successful science fiction mag.

BIGGEST CIRCULATION BY FAR!
and we sell just as many overseas

Every issue contains a long novel and several short stories written by Britain's best and up-and-coming authors. Departments include a chatty editorial, lots of letters, scientific articles, film reviews, book reviews, guest articles by personalities. Our covers are AUTHENTIC, our illos the finest in Britain. We come out every month and have more than double the sales of any other British sf magazine. Boys, believe us, we're good!

Normally 35c a copy each month
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Ray Palmer, Universe Science Fiction, Amherst, Wisc.

PERSONALS

Want issues 1-8 of Psychotic. All issues of Quandry. Comet Stories. Girl SF addict 14 years of age for correspondence. Ooops, almost forgot, want VEGAnnish. Wayne Strichland, 4920 Orchard Avenue, San Diego 7, Calif . . . *Want complete set of Mag of Fantasy & SF. As a last resort single copies or full years will be accepted. Also want first ten ishes of OW. Ed Luksus,* 3717 *Johnson St., Gary, Ind.* . . . Back issues of OW, Madge and many other stf mags and books for sale Send post card for free list. Gerry de la Ree, 277 Howland Avenue, River Edge, N. J. . . . *Wanted: Madge* 1-6; *GS Novels* 1-11. *For sale: assorted pulps,* '46-'52; *No.* 1-3 *Rocket Stories; No.* 1-3 *Cosmos; Vortex* 1 & 2; *Orbit No.* 2; *ERB's Princes of Mars, orig, ed., fair cond., no d/w. Send for list to Dainis Bisenieks,* 336 *S. Warren, Saginaw, Mich.* . . Will sell the following or will trade for issues of Madge prior to May '52 or aSF prior to Feb '52: OW, June '52 to July '53; Science Stories, Dec '53 to Apr '54; F&SF, scattered issues from June '52 to Apr '54; IF, scattered issues from Mar '53 to July '54; Universe, 2 to 6; Galaxy, Jan '52 to June '54 Marshall Edgell, 4 Memorial Drive W., West Lafayette, Ind . . . *Looking for penpals, and also want to trade stamps or view-cards. Ralcigh Evans Multog, 7 Greenwood Road, Pikesville* 8, Md . . . Have 22 used E. R. Burroughs books, mostly first editions. Will sell or trade for E. E. Smith books. Send stamp for prices. Rodney J. Reston, 44 Second Street, Amsterdam, N. Y . . . *For sale: Madge No.* 6-32; *OW No.* 11-31; *assorted magazines and books. N. B. Crider,* 5711 *Woodrow Ave., Austin, Texas* . . . Have several hundred horror and stf comics such as Marvel Tales, Weird, Buck Rogers, etc. Many first issues. Have some pulps, and several thousand foreign and U.S. stamps. Want: many stf and fantasy mags; send lists. Also want records by members of the "Golden Age of Song" such as Caruso, Galli-Curci, etc. Roger Smyth, 712 West 176 St., NYC 33 . . . *The Indiana Science Fiction Assoc. is interested in acquiring new members. No specific membership requirements, just an interest in stf. Dues are* $3.00 *a year in Indianapolis,* $1.50 *elsewhere. Members receive fanzine and newsletter. For further information write Edward N. McNulty,* 5645 *N. Winthrop St., Indianapolis Ind* . . . Just a reminder to send in your personals, but keep them brief, legible (if they're hand-written), and be sure to include your name and address.—Bea.

For Your Convenience . . .

Many times we receive letters saying readers have reached the newsstand only to find that UNIVERSE is all sold out. Many newsstands do not carry UNIVERSE. Or for one reason or another, a reader has missed out on an issue. This is unfortunate and sometimes can't be avoided. But you needn't miss a single copy of your favorite magazine if you take advantage of the offer on this page. And besides, you'll save money. The normal price for UNIVERSE is 35c. We will send it to you in the mail for 25c per copy. Why not get your magazine the easy way? Subscribe now for 24 issues for $6.00. Then you won't have to bother for a long time to come. At least send in $3.00 for 12 issuues, and let us keep you supplied and post you when a renewal is due.

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LETTERS

Dear Rap:

Nope, the July issue of UNIVERSE didn't surprise me one bit, I had a silly hunch that you couldn't go on publishing a science fiction magazine, and I was right. With the UNIVERSE of July, that atmosphere you had in good old OW came back. And with it, Rap, so did you.

After the 31st issue of OW had been on the stands for three or four months, I began to think that something was wrong. Then, out of the blue came SCIENCE STORIES, UNIVERSE, MYSTIC and, holding its own, FATE. Now that things have calmed down a bit at the Evanston offices, and SCIENCE STORIES has been dropped, it looks as if things are getting brighter.

Rog Phillip's THE CLUB HOUSE is about the best thing that you could have started to give the mag a shot in the arm. When it got squeezed out of the old *Amazing*, I felt something go . . . To me, Rog's column was the spirit of fandom. I wasn't an acti-fan while it was still being run, but I can remember reading it and wondering what it was all like. Now that I'm in the middle of this thing that calls itself fandom, I realize that nothing can ever bring back the first days of it. Reading over the back issues of *Amazing* helps a bit, but the flavor isn't there any more. Now, perhaps, UNIVERSE will help the fan-to-be into the middle of the brawl, leaving him, I hope, with the same memories that I have of THE CLUB HOUSE.

Since I plunked down my 35c at the corner drug store, I am, by the Palmer philosophy, a stock-holder in Palmer Publications. Attention, Mr. Palmer. I have a request to make of *my* company . . .

Please, Rap, no matter how much you'd like to, don't bring back THE MAN FROM TOMORROW. Just go along publishing the mag, leaving the high pressure promotions to the soap-and-cigarette people. Let's have UNIVERSE be just a nice, honest science fiction magazine —Palmerized, that is!

Like the true fan I am, the sto-

ries have not been read. I may turn traitor, though, and sample a few just to see what you've got. But your change of heart is enough for me . . .

And, Rap, the next three bucks I lay my hands on goes to you; I've got faith in you—and UNIVERSE.

Sincerely,

Don Wegars
2444 Valley St.
Berkeley 4, Calif.

The Man from Tomorrow is still around, Don, but not in UNIVERSE; he's appearing regularly in our companion magazine, MYSTIC. We're going to keep UNIVERSE strictly for science-fiction, fantasy, and fans. As a stockholder it's up to you to let us know when we stray from the mark, so keep those letters heading our way. —Bea

Dear Bea:

You and Ray write editorials second to none (the possible exception is John W. Campbell Jr.). That was some pretty fast thinking; imagine, blaming the "get rich quick boys" for your bad editing. A stroke of pure genius. As I've always enjoyed your mags, I can't say as I believe the above — but that's the way it sounded.

No need evaluating the stories; Ray summed it up when he made the observation that good stories are far between. Rog Phillips' section was very good, as are most fan sections.

Michael Lee should know better

"With God . . .

all things are possible!"

Are you facing difficult *Problems? Poor Health? Money* or *Job Troubles? Love* or *Family Troubles?* Are you *Worried* about someone dear to you? Is some one dear to you *Drinking* too Much? Do you ever get *Lonely — Unhappy — Discouraged?* Would you like to have more *Happiness, Success* and *"Good Fortune"* in *Life?*

If you do have any of these *Problems,* or others like them, dear friend, then here is wonderful *NEWS — NEWS* of a remarkable *NEW WAY of PRAYER* that is helping thousands of other men and women to glorious *NEW* happiness and joy! Whether you have always believed in *PRAYER* or not, this remarkable *NEW WAY* may bring a whole *NEW* world of happiness and joy to you—and very, very quickly too!

So don't wait, dear friend. Don't let another minute go by! If you are troubled, worried or unhappy *IN ANY WAY* — we invite you to clip this *Message* now and mail with 6c in stamps so we can rush *FULL INFORMATION* to you by *AIR MAIL* about this remarkable *NEW WAY of PRAYER* that is helping so many others and may just as certainly and quickly help *YOU!*

You will surely bless this day—so please don't delay! Just clip this *Message* now and mail with your name, address and 6c in stamps to *LIFE-STUDY FELLOWSHIP, Box 8409 Noroton, Conn.* We will rush this wonderful *NEW Message of PRAYER and FAITH* to you by *AIR MAIL.*

than to treat his mags so rough. Me, I baby em so you'd think they'd never been read; most of the time, that is. You've either got to put up with the nudes or start on western stories or nursery rhymes. Somehow the idea has circulated that if you don't have a near-dissected pin-up on the cover, the mag don't sell.

Michael Lee, I hope you didn't mean that about buying until the moon flight. If so, why not subscribe up to ish No. 34 and save some money in the meantime. Why not subscribe to all the mags and save enough to book passage on the 5th trip?

Ed Luksus
3717 Johnson St.
Gary, Indiana

Good press-agenting, Ed, and good sense, too. Subscriptions do *save money. Maybe not enough to book passage on a moon flight, but enough to make it worth while. —Bea*

Dear Bea:

Wonderful news! Rog Phillips is a 'right' guy and proved it many times in the *Amazing* Club House. And now he'll be with us in *Universe* (I *like* that name) and he will do a good job with the "Club House" as usual. Thanks for talking him into the extra work.

I sincerely hope that all Faneds who read this will take the time to welcome Rog back again. Just a line to Bea will show that we DO appreciate his work. Many a neofan mentioned the "Club House" when asking for a copy of my Kaymar Trader. I know many of you had the same experience.

Just read the July Club House and you will know what I mean by Rog being a 'right' guy. He is still a fan at heart. I hope he stays that way for a long time.

There is *no* comparison between *Science Stories* and *Universe*. The change was for the better in every way. I'm sure many of the readers will agree with me. In fact I now get three copies of UNIVERSE, as I expect it to climb right up there along with Galaxy and aSF in popularity.

Anyone who wants a copy of Kaymar Trader just slip a thin dime into your letter. You'll get the latest in sales, buys, and trades of stf magazines.

Best regards to RAP. He is still in there fighting. His editorials are always interesting and I hope they continue to appear for many, many years.

Sincerely
K. Martin Carlson (Kaymar)
1028 Third Avenue South
Moorhead, Minnesota

Judging from the letters we're receiving Rog Phillips and his Club House were much missed and most welcome back. Since fandom has become so wide-spread and grown so in the last few years it's almost a necessity to have at least one prozine column operating as an information center for fanzines and fan activities. Rog, as you pointed out, is a fan at heart. In addition, he knows (either personally or by correspondence) most of the actifans and is happy to go out of his way to help neofans. We're glad he's back, and the stack of letters we have tell us you readers feel the same way.—Bea

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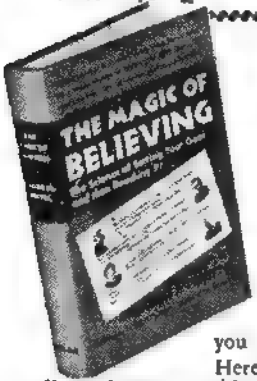

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Dear Ray,

I've just picked up the July issue of Universe and I like the change very much. It makes Universe almost like the old Other Worlds. I'm sorry to hear that Science Stories has been discontinued but it will give you more time to devote to Universe. You and Bea have done the work of many people in putting out Universe, Science Stories, and Mystic. So if your fans are wondering why Science Stories had to be discontinued that is the reason. You've just been working too hard.

Much success to you on Universe. I'm sure you'll pick up many new and loyal fans, like I am, to Universe.

Paul Corley
627 Sheridan Road
Winnetka, Illinois

Thanks, Paul, for your remarks about UNIVERSE and its editors. I appreciate them, and I'm sure Rap does, also. Now that my office is in Cincinnati you won't be able to drop in for a visit (it's about a 400 mile trip, and that's a little too far even for the most loyal fan to travel), so be sure to drop us a line now and then and tell us how you think the magazine is coming along.—Bea

Dear Ray:

This is more or less a reply to the letter written by Michael Lee in UNIVERSE No. 6. From Mr. Lee's style of writing it is easy to judge that he is immature and perhaps even juvenile. Yet he has hit upon a very interesting fact. Frank Robinson is perhaps the greatest talent that you have ever encouraged. I don't think that Mr. Robinson would lead us down paths of Robinsonisms, as did Richard Shaver. From his past efforts I have noted an exceptional gift for characterization. The reader-identification in his stories makes it easy to just jump right in and read; you hate to lay the magazine aside once you've started.

In the talent of Frank Robinson, occasional traits are hinted at that make me, for one, wish for much more. If on this point alone: I believe that there is a great emotional depth lying dormant in Robinson's style that cannot be fully developed in anything less than 60,500 words. I wait with expectation for something of this scope to appear.

Mr. Lee is not alone in liking THE OCEANS ARE WIDE. I read it two times in SCIENCE STORIES No. 4, and just re-read it again yesterday, in Bleiler — Dikty's YEARS BEST SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS: 1954. It is easily the most noteworthy item in the volume.

THE OCEANS ARE WIDE and DEAD END KIDS FROM SPACE (*Without* the cover-tie-in prologue.) are the two most worthwhile stories that you've printed since publication of OTHER WORLDS was suspended.

If Mr. Robinson continues to develop with the slow, sure speed that he has displayed since 1951, given an equal amount of writing experience, he *will* rank with the literary authors in the field, Leiber, Sturgeon and Bradbury. He already rates well above your literary hacks, and there will be no stopping

him once he has committed the full emotional depths of his talent to paper in manuscript form.

Knowing your past record, you will develop Robinson's talent to the limits of your capability. For doing this, thanks in advance, from those of us like Mr. Lee, who watch —and wait—and know that in time we will be rewarded.

Regarding Mr. Lee's opinion of Robert Courtney, I find his talent and Robinson's too equal for comment. What Mr. Robinson possesses so does Mr. Courtney. Consequently, great things are due from them both.

Earl Kemp
3508 N. Sheffield Ave.
Chicago 13, Illinois

Earl, I think Frank Robinson will agree with me that you've paid him a great compliment — not only by what you said, but by what you didn't say. When a fanzine editor writes a letter to a prozine, for publication, and doesn't bother to even mention *his own zine—well, you must really go for Robinson's stories. And say, why the specific number of words you think the next Robinson story should contain. Most people would have suggested a* 50,000 *or* 60,000 *word novel, but you narrowed it down to* 60,500 *words. Do you have some inside information? If so, why not share it with the rest of us? By the way, we do have another story of his coming up soon, so watch for it.—Bea*

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